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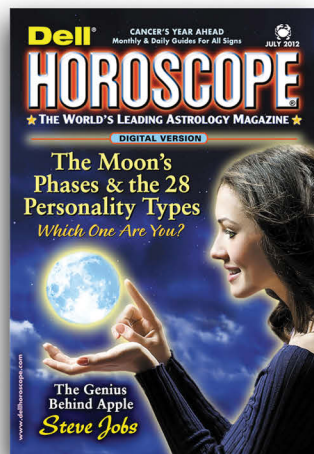
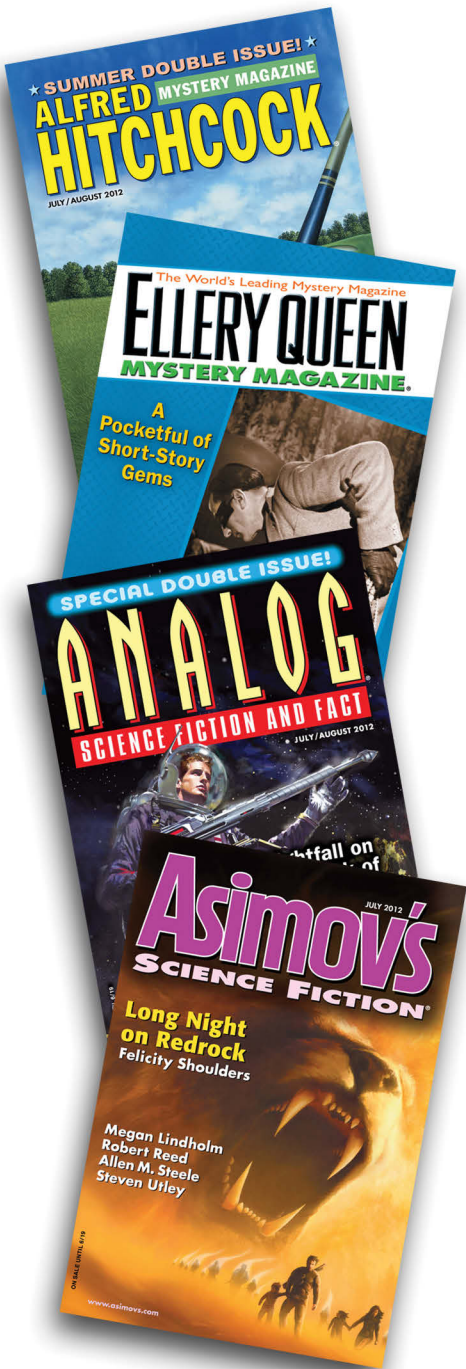
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SCIENCE FICTION

JUNE 2014

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BUMMED OUT AND UGLY ON THE OCCASSION OF PHILIP K. DICK'S BIRTHDAY

Last June, we ran a guest editorial commemorating the birth of Isaac Asimov. This year, we celebrate Philip K. Dick with an essay by Alice Sola Kim that has been reprinted from BuzzFeed Books. Alice's essay originally appeared on December 16, 2013, which would have been Phil Dick's eighty-fifth birthday.

The great thing about the library was that nothing too fucked up could happen there.

Untold multitudes of librarians and patrons would disagree with me, but I'm only speaking for myself. Even when I went to the library with my father, things were relatively chill between us, and would remain that way until we left. It was a building decorated in every shade of brown the seventies had on offer.

We walked to the back of the library, past the magazine racks, to the reference materials and the study tables. All sorts of people sat back here, but the ones I noticed the most were the crazy people, because I was with one. The library was wonderful because it was calm and full of books and this peace could be anyone's for no price at all. If you're crazy at a certain level, chances are, you don't have an office to be crazy in. The library is a decent replacement—an office of crazy, where you can work on projects no one cares about or understands, sitting at a heavy wooden table next to lamps and metal carts and encyclopedias. And my father worked very hard.

"Come back fast," he said. "You have to help me."

He sat, and I escaped like I was spring-loaded and shot at the science fiction section. I brought some books back and sat down with him. I hated to look at him writing his crazy-ass letters. He wrote with such care, his letters so pristinely serified they looked Old German, and

everything he wrote was straight garbage at best, something that would put him in jail at worst. I hated it so much, and it got sadder the more I thought about it until I thought I would start scream-crying at the office of crazy. So I went elsewhere. I read about anywhere but here. I read about space shit. No one wants to be that predictable and psychologically obvious, but sometimes things are exactly the way you expect them to be.

Once in a while, my dad would interrupt me. "How do you spell 'legislation'?" he'd say. "How do you spell 'inheritance'?" Questions like that, words like that. Sometimes he had me copyedit the whole thing, fixing spellings and sentence structures for letters in which he politely requested the return of three million dollars from the governor, or a helicopter to Seoul. And I would go from crazy-ass letter to book to letter, book, letter, book.

The world my dad lived in was the one in which dark forces thwarted him at every turn, keeping his fortune just out of reach and turning his family against him. He knew it was a false world, and none of the letters he wrote to the president or the rants he subjected us to were able to bring back the true world. At the library, he would write his letters and I would read Philip K. Dick and, each of us, in our own way, would hate this world.

Today is Philip K. Dick's birthday. Even if you don't care about science fiction, you know about him. There's the Philip K. Dick who belongs to everyone: American science fiction writer, known for drugs, paranoia, ontological fuckery, and the occasional really awful sentence. A heap of screen adaptations, most of which are glossily plastinated trash. At this point, dude is even recognizable as an adjective: You can throw Dickian on the heap with Dickensian, Orwellian, and, like, no women.

There's also the Philip K. Dick who is mine. The one I've been reading for half my life. The one who wormed his way into my life before I could be thoughtful and critical about the things I loved. The one who reigns in my personal pantheon.

Recently I hung out in a group with a guy who said innocently, "Being fat led me to *Star Trek*." We all laughed, but he hadn't been joking. That would've been a bad joke, a ha-ha-ha-nerds-are-like-*this* joke of the variety I have absolutely no time for. We laughed because he wholly meant it. It's not the whole truth, but I will match that guy and say that being bummed out and ugly led me to Philip K. Dick. *Helped*, anyway.

At fifteen, there are a multitude of things that can make us bummed out and ugly. Physically, I did not have my shit together—haystack hair, a round and unfinished face, a gawky body with these boobless tits that were all nipple. Even when we're hideous as teenagers, we also look sort of uniquely, never-again great, so when people claim they were ugly back then it's hard to believe. Yet it felt irrefutably true. And we were poor and my dad was crazy, major bummers both and a formula that equaled staying long hours at the library while embarking on the grand project of reading everything in the science fiction section.

When I found Philip K. Dick, he was no big secret. He was in a partial state of re-discovery—there were a bunch of nice paperback reissues from Vintage, plus a five-volume set of collected stories on which I systematically placed holds at the library. Everything—I placed holds on everything. Why'd I get it so bad for Philip K. Dick?

I first loved the twists. The showmanship! The pulpy excitement of it all! The first PKD book I ever read was *Eye in the Sky*, about eight visitors to a particle accelerator who get trapped in each others' subjective realities. Back then, it was so easy to wow and surprise me, and each time the world as we knew it turned out to be a construct, false, *somehow not right*—it knocked me over. Imagine PKD typing in a Benzedrine tap dance thinking that this would really get them. Did it ever. If you pet a dog in a PKD novel,

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get ready for the dog to melt and in the puddle will be a slip of paper that reads “SOFT-DRINK STAND.”

Of course, there was more to it. Knowing that reality could be up for grabs, manipulated, and twisted gave me a prickly, shivery joy. But this would be a shallow pleasure without the deep sense of sadness in the best of PKD’s work. When the world you knew was ripped away from you, even if in that world you had a shitty job and couldn’t get a date, he recognized that you had to mourn. You mourned for the false world that you missed, you mourned that any kind of true, real world was elusive or else completely lost and that nothing would ever be the way it was meant to be, whatever that was.

There are cool ways to be into science fiction, and there are less cool ways. If I’m really going to dig into it, being into Philip K. Dick used to be a hipster’s way of liking science fiction. (It’s now probably sub-hip, a little past-hip, a bit like being into Haruki Murakami.) However, PKD is great at eluding coolness. It’s a singular joy to read his work and find what is elegant and transcendental about it but also very much pulp trash—lowdown and frumpy. In *Ubik*, PKD performs a kind of genre Tourette’s by continually describing the weird outfits that all of the characters wear. For. No. Good. Reason. He loved a good throwaway idea, and sprinkled things like telepathic Martian jackals and slime molds from Ganymede and psychic newspapers throughout his stories. Appropriately, his characters were often losers. They were hustlers and auditioners, scrappy people who seemed anxious all the time and had to balance getting ahead with being decent protagonists.

PKD cared about trash—or, rather, that which others deemed to be trash.

What do you do when you grow up in a world you hate? Sometimes, you do a 360-degree pivot turn on your heel and run right back into its arms. I thought absolutely none of this at the time, I’m pretty sure, but looking back, PKD’s was a science fiction that made my life seem okay. Granted, the crazy of PKD’s work and my dad’s crazy weren’t the same. My dad’s crazy was sad, boring, degraded, and de-

grading, and as I’ve hopefully established, the crazy in PKD’s work is *incredibly the greatest*, as well as heartbreaking and dignified in the most unexpected of ways. But all throughout PKD’s stories and novels I found loserness and crazy and I found trying one’s best and having it all be futile, swept into the trash with the leavings of a discarded world. I found both the things I did not want to think about and the opposite of those things, aka space shit. I think it helped.

Years ago I briefly dated someone and the best thing this person did was try to take me to the apartment PKD had been living in when he died. I say “try” because it’s unclear that this was the actual apartment he lived in. It was in Orange County, and the sun was hot like a huge hand pressing down on us. Things were pretty much over between us, but I stepped closer and draped my arms over him. Pickup artists everywhere, take note: Bring her to the place where her favorite science fiction writer had a stroke and she’ll go wiiiiiiiiiiiiild.

“We should ask someone,” one of us said. No one came in or went out. I squinted at the ugly building trying to glean anything PKD-like about it, and the Necker Cube in my mind shifted drowsily left then right. It was probably not his building. It probably was. This was exactly the kind of place where life would end. This was not a fitting place for him spend the last years of his life. This guy and I were being momentous and interesting. This guy and I were deluded and confused.

Oh, and now I see that was, I guess, the whole point. Happy birthday, Philip K. Dick. ○

Alice Sola Kim’s fiction appears in *Lightspeed*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *The Year’s Best Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and elsewhere. She is a recipient of a grant from the Elizabeth George Foundation and a MacDowell Colony residency, and has been honor-listed twice for the James Tiptree, Jr. Award.

ANOTHER TRANSITION

This is a time of computer transition for me—a rare event, because I’m not someone who trades in his computer for a new model every year or so. Quite the contrary: I am maddeningly, preposterously, insanely retentive when it comes to computers.

I was one of the first SF writers to switch from the typewriter to the computer. I started to investigate that possibility in 1979—not for writing, because in 1979 I had vowed to stop writing fiction forever, and actually thought I meant it—but for my financial and business records.

Computers in 1979 were pretty primitive things. The Apple II was around then, and various other makes, the Altair 8800, Imsai 8080, Tandy TRS-80, etc. They had screens, and most of them, not all, had keyboards, but where they fell short was in the matter of memory, for which an achingly slow tape-deck thing was used. I visited one of the pioneering computer stores in Berkeley, explained my needs, and the clerk suggested that I wait a year or two before buying. “They’re going to put out something called a Winchester drive,” he said. “All of today’s computers will be obsolete overnight.” A “Winchester drive” was what we call a hard disk today.

So I put the computer-buying project on the back burner, even though my “permanent” retirement from writing fiction had ended with the writing of *Lord Valentine’s Castle* in 1980. A long novel like that was a considerable chore, with plenty of paper wasted as I banged out two six hundred-page drafts. But a lot was going on in my life besides writing, just then, and so it was easy to sidestep the business of buying a computer for a while.

What tipped me over into modern technology was my 1982 novel—*Lord of Darkness*—half again as long as *Castle*, nine hundred manuscript pages, and then a second draft just as long, and by the time I was done with that I never wanted to use a typewriter again. So I

asked my friend Jerry Pournelle, one of the earliest computer users in our field, to explain this whole computer thing to me. He did, in a letter of about eighteen pages, a splendid essay on what computers were and how to use them, and swiftly I headed out to find one.

Those of you who weren’t on the scene in 1982 may be unaware that the computers manufactured then had unique operating systems; nothing was compatible with anything else, but for machines using the CP/M operating system, and the various CP/M computers tended to exist in isolated universes. Nor did they come equipped with the fabled Winchester drives; they used floppy disks—the old five-and-a-half-inch size. The most popular among writers then was a portable computer, the Osborne, with a postage-stamp-sized screen; it looked like a toy to me. But then I discovered the world of dedicated word processors made for office use. They had proprietary software that was remarkably easy to use, they were much sturdier than the flimsy machines that most of my colleagues had, and they came with hard drives—not called Winchesters any more—with enough capacity to hold several complete novels.

So I bought a Compucorp word processor, and for a huge extra amount equipped it with a gigantic ten-megabyte hard drive, the biggest available then, and in November 1982, I began with much trepidation to write a novella on that newfangled thing. I didn’t really believe that yesterday’s work would still be on the hard disk when I sat down to work the next day, so I printed out my new pages every day, just in case. But yesterday’s work was always there the next day. And the computer proved its value in many other ways. In order to change a character’s name fifty pages through the story, because it conflicted with another character’s name, I simply did a search and replace, and the name-change was instantaneous, no

need for me to hunt through a bulky manuscript to find every instance of the name I wanted to scrap. And when I was done with the first draft, I did my revisions by hand on the print-out, keyed them in, pressed the “print” key, and out came a flawless final draft.

Very likely I’d be using that creaky 1982 computer even now, but for the fact that in 1991 it lost contact with my printer, and the technician who usually got me through such glitches could find no way to get me through this one. By then, though, standardized PCs using DOS operating systems had appeared, so writers could send diskettes to editors and skip the manuscript stage entirely, whereas I was still plodding along with my totally noncompatible software. It was fine software—to this day, I have not encountered an easier or more flexible word-processing program than Arrow, the one that came with my Compucorp—and after nine years of experience with it, I wanted to keep on using it. But Compucorp, by then, was out of business. Then I learned that Arrow was now available in a DOS version that could be used on any of the many makes of PCs that had come into use. I did a little comparative shopping, bought a Compaq 386 computer, installed Arrow on it, and set happily to work.

I loved using it. In fact I went on using it and using it and using it as decades went by. Computers aren’t supposed to last forever, and indeed most don’t last more than a few years; but there I was, still turning out books on my Compaq 386 in the new century, and doing my personal and business bookkeeping on it too. The demise of my Compucorp had been a blessing in disguise; now I was a DOS user like everybody else, no longer locked into a unique and non-compatible operating system, and I could back up my work on my wife’s computer, or on the second computer that I bought for my own backup purposes, or any other DOS computer I chose.

During those years the Internet happened. My computer had no modem, but that was all right, because I didn’t want the distraction of e-mail or eBay or e-anything while I worked. Around 1998, I

bought a laptop for Internet use in the main house, and eventually upgraded to a Macintosh iMac; but over in my office, a separate building, I worked on and on with my ever more ancient Compaq, using my beloved Arrow software.

I worked on and on, yes, but not without a certain tension as the years went by, because I knew that my office computer had lasted well beyond its plausible life span, and every morning as I headed for the office to begin the day’s work I wondered whether this might be the morning when it would no longer respond. I had it all backed up on a laptop computer but, even so, I knew it would be tremendously traumatic when the day came that my good old Compaq suddenly could not be made to work.

That day came a couple of months ago. I had just written a new column for *Asimov’s*, and I was backing it up onto a diskette so I could turn it into an ASCII file, take it over to the main house, convert it to a Word document, and e-mail it to the magazine, when suddenly my computer abruptly announced that its C drive—that is, the primary one—could not be found. I went into the DOS directory and saw that all the C drive files were still there—long lists of them with cryptic DOS names, stories, novels, essays, business records, everything that I had put on that computer since 1991. But I had no access to anything.

Trauma, all right. I called in a local computer expert old enough to remember DOS-based computers, C drives, floppy disks, all that ancient stuff, and for a couple of mornings he tinkered with my venerable machine. Without success, though, for the problem was within the Arrow software, not in the computer itself, and Arrow had been a thing of the past for so long that no one now working with computers had any idea how to fix a chunk of corrupted code. This, I knew, was The End, Goetterdaemmerung for my dear old Compaq at last.

The disaster wasn’t total, though. I still had the entire contents of the Compaq backed up on the laptop, and I also had access to the A drive, the diskette drive, of the old computer. I wasn’t able to print

anything from the laptop—that's a different and very complicated story—but I could transfer any document I wanted from the laptop to a diskette, put it on the Compaq using the A drive, work with it there, and print the result. Writing to the A drive is slower than using the hard drive, of course, because I type quickly and the A drive, unable to keep up with the input at the speed with which I put it in, pauses every couple of minutes to catch up, and I have to wait while that is going on. But that's not a serious problem—certainly not while making bookkeeping entries, since those are made at a rather slower pace than the one with which I compose sentences, and even while writing essays I could easily deal with having to wait a moment for the computer before going on to the next word. Scrolling through something I've already written is slower, too, because a diskette doesn't have much memory; but I tell myself that waiting for the next line to show up is a Zen exercise for me, a belated education in learning a little patience.

The delays that the diskette drive enforces might be irritating if I were writing fiction, because sometimes fiction is written (at least in the first draft) in a white heat, and waiting for the computer might prove maddening. But I don't write much fiction any more. My last novel was published in 2002, and the encroachment of age leaves me without much desire to embark on any project that big again. Even short stories have become few and far between; I haven't written one since the early months of 2011, and at least for now I have no plans for doing any, though that could change quickly if some editor were to make me an offer I couldn't refuse.

I still do write the regular column for *Asimov's*, though, and various other essays from time to time, introductions to other people's books, and the like, and, because I still prefer to work with my familiar keyboard and the familiar white-on-black screen and the fine Arrow software of yesteryear, I've learned to do all that on the diskette drive, backing it up for safety's sake to the laptop, and then taking my diskette over to the iMac to

convert the new piece into a Word document and e-mail it off to its publisher. Doing business or financial bookkeeping that way plainly makes no sense, though. Some day the rest of the Compaq will die and I'll lose whatever documents may be stranded on it; and the Arrow software that does my arithmetical computations is incompatible with anything now in use, so I can't simply take backups of my business records over to the iMac and feed them into Excel or Word. Therefore I've been busy converting everything that involves mathematical computation into new Excel files—personal and professional tax files, investment data, earnings records, and so on.

It's been a long and wearisome job, and after two months I'm not done with it yet; but once again, as was the case when I had to make the switch from the CompuCorp to the Compaq nearly a quarter of a century ago, I recognize it as a blessing in disguise. Instead of keeping those records on a computer almost a quarter of a century old, using software that no one else knows how to use, I have them on my shiny modern iMac, backed up onto a second in-house iMac and also onto an external hard drive. And all the stories and novels that I wrote on the Compaq were long ago backed up and converted to Word files on the iMac, along with much of my pre-computer fiction, which various publishers have scanned and converted for me. So I no longer wonder, at the beginning of each day, whether this is the day that the computer catastrophe arrives at last. Other catastrophes, yes: there are always plenty of those to worry about, a 9.3 earthquake, a home-invasion robbery, a replay of the terrible firestorm of 1989 that destroyed three thousand homes less than a mile from where I live. But I'm not going to turn on my computer some morning and discover that I have lost access to everything I've written in the last couple of decades. There's comfort in knowing that I have successfully lived on into the post-Compaq age, or, more accurately, have been dragged into it, after at least a decade of worrying about what would happen when the old machine finally gave out. ○

IT'S AN HONOR JUST TO BE NOMINATED

origin story

Although I am writing in the fall of 2013, by the time you read this the nominees for the **Science Fiction Writers of America Nebula Award** <sfwa.org/nebula-awards>, will have been announced. While there are good arguments to be made that we spend too much time thinking about the Nebulas, **Hugos** <thehugoawards.org>, **World Fantasy Awards** <worldfantasy.org/awards> and the like, the fact is that not only do awards provide yearly snapshots of the state of science fiction and fantasy, but they often drive the critical discourse about what our genres do best and what they could do without.

The Nebula Award was the brainchild of **Lloyd Biggle Jr.** <sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/biggle_lloyd_jr>, who was the secretary/treasurer of the fledgling Science Fiction Writers of America in 1965. Biggle calculated that the cost of the awards and their attendant banquet ceremony could be paid for from sales of an anthology of nominees and winners. That yearly **anthology** <pyrsf.com/nebulaawards2013.htm> continues to be published to this day, although the cost of the expanded **Nebula Weekend** <www.sfwa.org/nebula-awards/nebula-weekend> exceeds the income it now brings in. The handsome trophy, designed by **J. A. Lawrence** <sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/lawrence_j_a> from a drawing by **Kate Wilhelm** <katewilhelm.com>, has changed little over the years. It takes the form of a transparent block of Lucite, 8x4x4 inches in size, in which is embedded a spiral nebula of glitter suspended over rock crystals. The mechanics of nominating and voting, on the other hand, have been the source of continuing controversy since day one, with more

rule changes than anyone cares to remember. For example, in the first year there was no preliminary ballot or shortlist, and so the voters of SFWA had to pick their favorites from some seventy nominees! The following year saw the first revision to the rules, resulting in just fourteen finalists.

Five Nebulas in four categories were awarded to that first class of 1966. The winner for best novel was **Frank Herbert's Dune** <dunenovels.com>, the tied winners for novella were "The Saliva Tree" by **Brian W. Aldiss** <brianaldiss.co.uk> and "He Who Shapes" by **Roger Zelazny** <sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/zelazny_roger>, the novelette was Zelazny's "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," and the short story was **Harlan Ellison's** <harlanellison.com> "**Repent, Harlequin!**" **Said the Ticktockman.**" <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%22Repent,_Harlequin!%22_Said_the_Ticktockman>. It was a stellar selection; almost all of these stories have stood the test of time.

But consider, for a moment, the snapshot of our genre in the mid-sixties which that first slate of nominees provides. Of the seventy nominees, just one was a woman, Jane Beauclerk, a pseudonym for **M. J. Engh** <mjengh.com>. And with very few exceptions, the nominated stories were all science fiction. Jump ahead to 2012, when **John Kessel** <<http://www4.ncsu.edu/~tenshi/index2.html>> and I edited the *Nebula Showcase* anthology; there were more women than men nominated, and more fantasy than science fiction on the final ballot.

Though not exactly Nebulas, SFWA has created three new literary awards since: the Ray Bradbury Award for Outstanding Dramatic Presentation, the An-

dre Norton Award for Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy, and the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award. The first incarnation of the Bradbury began in 1992, but due to very little interest from the Hollywood nominees, it went on hiatus, only to be revived in 1999. However, the attention this award gets from the film and television community remains minimal. The Norton Award was first given in 2006 and has been much more successful in bringing recognition to worthy novels and novelists. The first Grand Master award, a career honor given to living writers, was bestowed on **Robert A. Heinlein** <heinleinsociety.org> in 1975. Readers with long memories may recall that we reviewed the **list of Grand Masters** <asimovs.com/_issue_0511/Onthenet.shtml> in this space back in 2005. Since then, Harlan Ellison, **James Gunn** <sfcenter.ku.edu/bio.htm>, **Michael Moorcock** <multiverse.org>, **Harry Harrison** <michaelowencarroll.com/hh>, **Joe Haldeman** <www.joe-haldeman.com>, **Connie Willis** <sftv.org/cw>, and **Gene Wolfe** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gene_Wolfe> have joined their storied ranks.

keeping score

Since the first Nebulas were awarded in 1966, there have been two hundred and four winners by my (rough) count. This includes several ties, along with the extra Nebulas awarded in those years when they were given to dramatic presentations and scripts (now SFWA offers the Bradbury Award instead) and minus the award that **Lisa Tuttle** <lisatuttle.co.uk> declined in 1982. In that time, those most often called to the podium have been Connie Willis with seven wins, **Ursula K. Le Guin** <ursulakleguin.com> with six, and **Greg Bear** <gregbear.com>, Joe Haldeman, and **Robert Silverberg** <majipoor.com> in a three-way tie with five. Meanwhile, Robert Silverberg has racked up the most nominations with twenty-two, followed by Gene Wolfe with twenty, and Ursula K. Le Guin and Kate Wilhelm tied with eighteen.

Of course, for every winner, there is usually a raft of ~~losers~~ non-winners.

That is the way of awards, alas. **Avram Davidson** <avramdavidson.org> and **Bruce Sterling** <sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/sterling_bruce> are currently tied for the most nominations without a win with ten each, followed by **Thomas M. Disch** <sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/disch_thomas_m> with nine and **R. A. Lafferty** <mulle-kybernetik.com/RAL> and **Maureen McHugh** <sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/mchugh_maureen_f> with seven. Even those who have Nebulas on their shelves have lost more often than they have won. Gene Wolfe holds the record with eighteen losses; Robert Silverberg has seventeen; and **Jack McDevitt** <jackmcdevitt.com>, **Michael Swanwick** <michaelswanwick.com>, and Kate Wilhelm have lost fifteen times.

For all the intrepid statisticians out there, here's the breakdown of wins and losses by category. Ursula K. Le Guin has received the most Nebulas for Best Novel, with four wins out of six nominations. On the other hand, **Philip K. Dick** <philipkdickfans.com> and **Poul Anderson** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poul_Anderson> were both nominated five times without winning. **Nancy Kress** <sff.net/people/nan-kress> has won the most Nebulas for Best Novella with three out of her six nominations. **Michael Bishop** <www.michaelbishop-writer.com> has seven nominations without a win. **Ted Chiang** <sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/chiang_ted> has the most wins in the novelette category, with a perfect record of three nominations and three awards. At six nominations without a win, the all time novelette loser is . . . um . . . **me** <jimkelly.net>. Harlan Ellison has three Nebulas for his eight nominations. Michael Swanwick has the most nominations for short story without winning at six.

so what?

I admit that I was hesitant to draw your attention to the stats above, even though they are easily available on Wikipedia and the invaluable **Science Fiction Awards Database** <sfadb.com>. Why? Because to some extent it reinforces the zero sum mindset that tends to dominate the awards. Immedi-

ately after ballots are announced, all the nominees are winners. Friends send congratulatory messages; those fortunate few get their names printed in all the best places. Nominees remain in this exalted state right up until the moment the Nebula banquet begins. Then comes Squirm Time. Even if they have convinced themselves that they don't really care and besides they have no chance of winning and of course the whole enterprise of giving awards to works of art is silly, which is why they haven't bothered to write a speech, if they are in the banquet hall they must necessarily breathe the awards atmosphere, overheated as it is by seething ambition. Any anxiety, even if it is completely under control, becomes part of the spectacle. When the winners are announced, the bereft nominees are expected to applaud, smile tightly, and utter the awards mantra with as much grace as they can muster.

It's an honor just to be nominated.

In the immediate aftermath of a Nebula Awards banquet, that commonplace may not offer much consolation. But I would argue that winners and nominees, colleagues and fans, ought to acknowledge its truth. Imperfect as they are, the Nebulas have showcased some amazing fiction over the years and have pointed readers toward work they might otherwise have overlooked. With all the free publicity, a nomination can help launch a fledgling career or boost a sagging one.

Last year, the astute British critic Paul Kincaid published **a dyspeptic view of awards** <ttdlabyrinth.wordpress.com/2013/04/07/a-dyspeptic-view-of-awards> on his blog. In examining "the process, the nature, the character of awards" he limns the flaws in awards culture. Although he focuses on the Hugo and the **British Science Fiction Association Awards** <bsfa.co.uk/bsfa-awards>, his spot-on commentary applies to all awards. Kincaid asks what awards are for, then discounts claims that they honor the best, since best is, after all, clearly hyperbole, and even "one of the best" is slippery terminology that depends on standards that

resist consensus definition. Are they then popularity contests? The reality is that there is too much to read across too many genres. Some (?) . . . most (?) . . . voters read only the works of a few of their favorite authors and none of the other nominees, and then mark their ballots. So what then does popular mean? "Popular" is thus no more coherent, cohesive or explicable than 'best' as a description of what the award is honouring." In that case, what are awards about? "All awards, I would argue, are ways of asserting ownership by claiming the right to decide what is or is not to be acclaimed as the exemplars, the stars, the best of the genre."

An interesting argument, although I doubt anybody in SFWA would seriously contend that our jerry-built awards process has the exclusive ability to recognize the best science fiction. I do, however, applaud Kincaid's prescription for fixing broken awards: "I suspect that any award that attempts to cover the whole field and be all things to all people is already doomed to irrelevance. I think the awards that are likely to continue to engage our interest are those that are able to react quickly to the changing character of the genre, and particularly those that have a focus we can recognise and share."

exit

So yes, I have my own Nebula history. As a ten time loser, I once was a top contender for most nominations without a win. On a memorable (to me, at least) night in May of 2007, I broke the jinx and took home Best Novella, my one and only Nebula. That same night, my friend Jack McDevitt, who then had eleven losses without seeing the Lucite, won Best Novel. Since then we both have gone back to our losing ways. Jack has lost five times since, while I have lost just three.

But as I look back over my career as a contender, do I think my winner was somehow more special than all my other nominees? I do not! And was it really an honor to be nominated for each and every one? You bet! ○

Suzanne Palmer lives and works in a little pocket utopia in western Massachusetts filled with writers, artists, scientists, and dreamers during the day, and the grateful solitude of the stars at night. From her desk window, she often sees wild turkeys, deer, fox, and the occasional moose. She's been busy finishing up a novel, but took a break from it to tell a wrenching tale about the cost of mining precious resources on an alien planet and what it truly means to . . .

SHATTERDOWN

Suzanne Palmer

Four moons dotted the distant horizon, pale ghosts half-lost in shadow and framed on either side by Cjoi's heavy black boots propped up against the observation glass. She slouched in her chair, mute earpiece dangling at the base of her neck, her eyes and attention on the gas giant below. Ammonia clouds seethed and spun endless bright rivers of gold across its radiant face, deadly and compelling. Her dive-sphere was rolled toward the oncoming night, engines in stand-by, no interior lights except the tiny blips of critical systems to break the spell.

If she dared close her eyes, she knew the planet would still be there. She had no doubt it would be the last thing she ever saw; it was just a matter of when. *Not today*, she told herself. *Tomorrow is a possibility*.

She laughed, a hollow sound; from orbit, tomorrow was as near or as far as she wanted or dared. Assuming she didn't get caught, of course. The unspoiled view wasn't the only reason for running dark.

Somewhere out there, Helise was watching.

They'd met, each surprised and uncertain to see the other, on the viewing platform of the Protectorate orbital station. Helise stood straight and tall, standing out against the backdrop of motley, milling tourists in her crisp white uniform. Cjoi spotted her first, and froze in the crowd as those too-bright eyes swept slowly over the meaningless people to be stopped, startled, by a too-familiar face.

"Kinni-inhass," Helise had said. *Little flyer*. "You've hardly changed."

I tried, Cjoi did not say. Instead, they clasped arms and embraced, old friends, lovers once. "You stayed," she said.

"And you returned," Helise answered. "I never thought you would."

"Neither did I," she said. Need was an unbearable master.

She kept her sphere in the updraft of a high-pressure band, trailing just outside the uneasy junction between dusk and night. The blinding glare of the sun was behind her, ripping through the clouds below. Tiny traces of green and brown stained the edges of the upwell, the light catching, here and there, in the faint diamond sparkle that had earned Pahlati the nickname Shining Giant.

When she'd first been brought here aboard the *Ama*, the glimmer had been a glare, like stars themselves were being born in the planet's toxic halo. How could it have dimmed, while that day was still seared, permanent and bright, across all the fields of her mind?

"Do you know me?" she asked the planet below her feet. It didn't answer, its churning face a vast, inscrutable mask. If planets had a memory, it would.

"Dinner," Helise had said, not really a question so much as an assumption. It was easy to say yes; with food to fill the space between them, other things might be less obvious.

Cjoi didn't have anything to wear, beyond the clothes on her back, that wasn't meant for space. Black tank top, black pants that had been cut to de-emphasize her thick, muscular build, black boots that gave her extra height to hide from the world that she'd been "grown small." She'd given up caring enough to hide her skin, saw it as a defiance. Helise hadn't flinched, hadn't cared, all those years ago; at this moment, Cjoi despised her for it, for being here now.

There was a café on the upper decks of the station, the ceiling a dome of thick xglass that was all that lay between the chattering people poking at their desserts with shining forks, and a short, sharp death. The station spun edge-on to the world, as if to foster an illusion that they were co-conspirators, equals, side by side; she preferred it beneath her boots.

Helise was waiting at a table already, and stood as she walked onto the deck. Heads turned her way, then away again, talking behind their hands as if that could conceal their curiosity. *One of them*, she heard. *An original. One of the rescued. I thought they were all dead. Look at her skin! Do you think it hurts?*

"Ah!" Helise said. "So graceful, as always. I forgot how much I loved to watch you move." She smiled, genuine affection in it, and Cjoi forgave her just a little.

She put her hand on the back of the chair, found the mag release, and slid it out before letting it click back onto the floor. Sitting, she turned her head, scanning the room, and heads turned back to their own tables as her eyes reached them.

"You shouldn't do that," Helise said.

"Make people uncomfortable?"

"Notice or care if they are."

Cjoi shrugged, passed a hand over the tabletop to activate the menu display. "They have anything edible here?" she asked. After a moment, she added, "Or affordable?"

Helise leaned back in her seat. She was still wearing her uniform, although the jacket was unbuttoned, revealing a crimson blouse. "It's on me," she said. "One of the perks of being stationed here: free meals. Probably because there are seventeen menu items and they never change. No matter how good they are, if we had to pay to eat the same thing over and over again every day, we'd hurl ourselves down into the clouds in despair."

Cjoi laughed. "I've done it," she said. "It doesn't work."

"Sorry," Helise said. After an awkward pause, she brought up her own menu, though she must have had it memorized long before now. "None of you ever came back here, except Mirja, you know," she said at last. "And . . . Well. Why did you?"

"Come back?"

"Yes."

"Not for the same reason as Mirja." *Exactly for the same reason as Mirja: because staying away was just another death.*

"Why, then?"

"To remember."

"The others?"

"Myself," Cjoi said. *Too much.* She selected an item nearly at random, turned the menu off. "Let's hope the pasta is decent. Now, what are your thoughts on wine?"

She rolled her dive sphere down and to starboard, keeping it steady along the shifting edges of the upwell. The horizon remained clear, as it should be. She'd hoped the wine would get Helise talking about her work and the Protectorate patrols, but instead Helise wanted to talk about Cjoi—where she'd gone, what she was *doing with herself* now, and again that persistent question of why she'd come back.

At least the pasta had been good, and the portion large. Cjoi craved carbs like a furnace, always burning, seeking fuel. In the time since the *Ama*, she had become acquainted with the luxury of a full stomach, and found it hard not to pursue at any opportunity. Even alcohol didn't prove a significant challenge to her overdriven metabolism, more was the pity.

Clear-headed and clear-eyed, she descended toward the thin wisp of the updraft zone. Ahead, her systems were picking up one of the ever-present storms that spun the face of the world in endless pursuit of its smaller fellows; in its wake, the clouds were a churned up mess of brown and green as great colonies of skymoss were pulled up from the depths, torn apart and scattered, to slowly settle back down and regroup.

Even running dark, her sphere would become more obvious the closer she got to the clouds rushing beneath her, a mote in the setting sun's brilliance. Her fingers moved over the helm controls, as familiar as any lover—more so—and the sphere dropped lower. Once cloaked in the ammonia fog, she would be nearly invisible; Pahlati's magnetosphere, screaming chaos across the radios of anyone near enough and masochistic enough to listen, would mask what faint whispers her ship traced in the depths. And they *would* be faint; she had spent an obscene amount of credit on tech.

The settlement trust from Giardal Enterprises had been significant, even divided as it was among the survivors. *Seventeen of one hundred sixty-four*, she thought. Fifty-nine had died before she'd even been sold to the Corp, desperate parents trading another mouth they couldn't feed for food that wouldn't last. Whatever anger and hurt she might have had over it went away when she outlasted them, outlived her birth colony. She'd outlived the Enterprises too, but that anger would not die down so easily.

Memories, and news, kept it stoked: Irya and Liline, pulled apart by a mob on Crigge colony as suspected mutants. Hae killed in a bar fight she most likely started. Odelia, Hae's opposite, the glue that kept them together and sane, dead in a Humans First bomb attack in an Ogloli spaceport. The rest, one by one, dead in different violent or stupid or inevitable ways.

With Mirja's suicide, Cjoi was the last. And the whole balance of the trust, and the burden of its ghosts, had come down to settle on her. *And I brought them back here*, she thought. *Ha. Fucking Percival of the ghost girls, that's me. Last one left to find the Grail.*

She set her sphere on a shallow descent, and watched the barometric pressure steadily climb as she fought the updraft and slipped deeper into ammonia fog. Tiny crystals began pinging off the hull. Just ice, for now. Even through the thick hull, she knew the sound, and her skin prickled at the memory. A tiny row of scales flushed upright along her forearm, and absently she smoothed them back down.

Another two kil down into Pahlati's troposphere, the patter had become louder, smoother. She waited to hear the first thump of something larger than ice, the beginnings of the storm she was seeking, but nothing. *Helise was exaggerating*, she told herself. *Protectorate propaganda, only.*

Still, even if exaggerated . . . Cjoi had seen with her own eyes how the planet had changed. She put her hand up on the console arm and switched on the external air buffers. Tiny jets would coat the outside of the dive sphere with a layer of moving air, deflecting all but direct hits around and away. *That* had cost. The roar of ice against

the shell instantly faded, if not the uncertainty that had stuck claws into her back, sending distress signals up and down her spine.

Below her, through the glass, she watched for any glints of light under the growing gloom of cloud-cover, as the barometer ticked steadily upward.

"Helise." A man had come up behind them, put a hand on the back of Helise's chair. He was achingly handsome, tall and smooth-skinned, everything Cjoi was not. He was smiling, friendly, radiating confidence like his own small sun.

"Ah! Ryon!" Helise turned, beaming. "This is Cjoi. You remember? I've talked about her."

"The kid?" Without asking, he pulled over a chair from the next table over, turning it around and sitting down beside Helise at the table, close enough their hips were touching. His smile grew wider. "Hardly a kid. My apologies."

Cjoi bit back a sharp reply. She and Helise were nearly the same age; was it height that kept her from being a grownup in people's eyes? Or was it the unshakable stigma of victimhood, writ large across her small frame? *I don't want to talk about me with you*, she thought.

Instead, she asked, "You're also in the Protectorate?"

"Science and survey."

"Ryon is also part of my quad," Helise added.

He leaned back. "If you plan on being around here for a bit, I'm sure we can talk about trying quint," he said. He winked. "Variety is the spice, and all that."

"I'm contented to stay solo," Cjoi answered. "And I don't plan on being here long."

"Oh," he said. "That's a pity."

Perhaps sensing Cjoi was uncomfortable, Helise put her hand over Ryon's. "Hey, I'm catching up with my friend, here. Don't you have something to do?" she asked.

"Johar and I are heading out in the *Veresiel* tonight, to take yet another set of atmospheric samples. Work, work, work. But if you two want to skip dessert here, we'd have time for a different type of exploratory—"

"Ryon, go away," Helise said. "Now."

He stood up, straightening his jacket. "Can't blame me for trying," he said. Reaching out, he picked up Cjoi's hand; she was too surprised to pull it away before he'd brought it to his lips, left a tender kiss on it, and let her go. "I do hate to miss out on rare treasures."

"Don't mind him," Helise said, as he sauntered off. "He's as incorrigible as he is charming, but . . . well. He has his plusses." She was blushing as she said it, and she suddenly seemed so very far away, receding back into a stranger.

Cjoi coughed, picking up another forkful of pasta to cover her discomfort. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not used to attention, at least not the flattering kind."

"I . . . look." Helise fidgeted in her chair. "It wouldn't be a problem for me, if you wanted some time alone with him—"

"No!" Cjoi said, more forcefully than she intended. Helise looked startled, then relieved. "I'm not staying here very long," she added. "I'm taking the next shuttle back out, tonight." She hadn't planned to, but knew she would as soon as she said it. It was too complicated here, her ability to think lost in a muddle of unhappiness.

"Well," Helise said, managing a smile. "I guess that means we do have time for dessert."

Cjoi held her dive sphere at eighty atmos pressure. This was as low as she'd ever gone; even Giardal Enterprises, in all their greed, had known that pushing their divers further was too risky.

They spent a lot on us, she thought. *Custom-made monsters.*

She sat there for a while, nothing to see but thick, toxic cloud through the glass. When she closed her eyes, at night, that same endless shade of gray pervaded her dreams.

Throwing her hand down on the console, she resumed her descent.

One last obligation, before escape. Helise had insisted Cjoi come to her scheduled talk, and since her shuttle was still more than two hours out, she saw no graceful way to say no. "I may never see you again," Helise had said.

"Don't make me part of it," she'd insisted.

The stepped hall was about half-full. Cjoi settled in the back of the room, up against the wall, where the bright lights at the podium wouldn't reach. She wondered how many different colonies the people crowded into the seats toward the front represented, colonies that had survived and thrived enough to produce something as frivolous and wasteful as *tourists*. To her they all looked the same.

She knew the planetary science inside and out; maybe she hadn't known the words ammonia and hydrogen until after she'd been freed, but she knew how they felt, how they burned. Helise walked out onto the floor and took up her space behind the podium as if that was the most natural place for her to be, and when she began to speak, her voice was loud and clear and without hesitation. If her eyes, roving the audience, found Cjoi huddled at the back, her expression did not change. The lights dimmed as the stage screen cleared to a live pic from the planet below, and the audience ooh'd and aaah'd on cue.

"The planet Pahlati was taken into Protectorate custody after it was declared a natural wonder of the galaxy, and deemed to be endangered. You might think it's hard to endanger a gas giant!"

Laughter.

"I was a junior staff member aboard the Protectorate flagship, *Lisians Champion*, eleven years ago. You could hardly see this beautiful vista you are now viewing behind me, so thick were the poaching ships in orbit. And of course, the Giardal Enterprises vessels." Helise pressed a button, and a giant blot of ugly ship appeared on the screen. The *Ama*. It threw Cjoi back in her seat, a visceral panic wrapping itself around her heart and lungs, and she had to force herself to breathe. *It's an image, she told herself. An old image. Nothing more. You watched the ship get towed into the scrapdock, watched it be turned to slag. Remember that.*

"All of these ships had come for one thing, and one thing only," Helise said. "The Pahlati Diamonds."

At a hundred-twenty atmos, she put her sphere into auto-pilot, holding steady. It was dark now, full into night, but this far down it hardly mattered. She knew this planet, the vortexes of this zone, better than she knew herself.

She'd been pushing up the pressure inside her sphere since she'd sealed herself into it, two days earlier. It had been parked two hops out from the shuttle station that serviced the Protectorate zone around Pahlati, just in case anyone tried to follow her. No one had. She'd had a surprisingly easy time navigating the tiny dead spaces between Protectorate sensors, which were set out to catch much bigger prey.

Interior acclimatization was now nearly caught up; she could feel the changes in her body, a thousand tiny genetic switches thrown to wake the sleeping monster. It was time. She pulled on gloves, then wrapped a control band on her left arm from wrist to elbow. Powering it on, she checked that it was syncing properly with helm control, then untethered herself from the ship's primary console.

She pulled her boots off, carefully, making sure the magsoles were on and she wouldn't suddenly end up with a heavy projectile in the cabin. Reaching overhead,

she pulled open the storage bin, carefully extracting her exosuit from its pocket. She hated the feel of it against her skin. Even now, still lagging open at her chest, hood down, it felt like a thick, skin-tight prison.

Sealing it down to the gloves, she slipped her boots back on. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes for a long moment, preparing herself. Then she lifted the hem of her tank top, first one side, then the other, and connected the suit's systems up to the implanted ports that ran directly into the cutting-edge, black-market hardware installed in her lungs.

At the press of a button, her seat detached from the control arms and slid through the floor of the control cabin into the narrow space below, clamping onto ring rails with a solid clunk of inevitability.

From her arm-band control, she set the sphere to slowly rotate one hundred eighty degrees. Her seat, running along the rails, stayed at the lowest point as the ship moved around her. From the outside of the control cabin wall, in easy reach above her face, she peeled off the equipment she wanted one piece at a time. Chute. Fluid recycling filters. Charged hi-ox packs. The breather apparatus and mouthpiece. The CO₂ force-exchanger. She attached them to her suit, hooking them into control, and running another set of checks on each before powering them live. Last was the breather setup; she inhaled deeply, enjoying that last, chill breath of filtered air, before she clicked it into the suit ports that ran into her lung implants. Instantly it began to fill her lungs with foam, and she fought the adrenaline-fear as she choked on it. When she couldn't not anymore, she breathed.

Shaking, she tried to calm herself by checking her med status. Oxygen levels were rising again, back toward normal, as the nanofoam pulsed mechanically through her lungs, adapting itself to the parameters of her immediate environment.

Last, she pulled her hood up around her head, sealed the faceplate—what claustrophobia that once would have brought no longer noticeable against the overwhelming sensory impact of the breather—and clipped in a thick pair of IR goggles. One final check for paranoia's sake, and then she lay there for a moment, letting the last of the wild panic get eased out of her system by the intense focus that always took her, pre-dive, from scared to angry to invincible.

Tapping at her arm, she initiated the drop sequence. She reached up and gripped the ring rail's double bars as the countdown in the peripheral vision of her goggles hit single digits, then, her heart racing, zero.

The hatch doors below her yawned wide, her seat splitting in half to open with them. All that held her now were her own hands, tight on the bars, and that brief recognition that, as always, the odds were against her return.

She smiled, and let go.

* * *

Helise clicked again, and the *Ama* disappeared, replaced by an impossibly beautiful, glittering thing, a three-dimensional crystal snowflake set carefully on blue velvet. "This is the largest specimen collected so far, that we know of," Helise said. "It is known as the Orbach Diamond, after the collector from whom it was confiscated."

It should be Nemi's Diamond, Cjoi thought. It was Nemi who'd caught it, who dove too deep, and came back to writhe and flail and die on the floor of the ship dorm while the masters oooh'd and aaah'd over her prize. *They're remembered, but not the names and faces of those who actually died for them.*

"There used to be an entire industry set up around stripping Pahlati of its Diamonds, from the wealthy collectors who coveted them, to the dealers who sold them, to the smugglers who supplied them, to ships like the one I just showed you, to the girls—some as young as five or six standards—who were thrown into the depths of the planet's atmosphere again and again to retrieve them. When the Protectorate

was formed, as a collaboration between Earth Alliance and the Gaian Collective, its first mission was to unravel the tangled cord that led us from this very diamond back to Pahlati, and to discover the horrifying circumstances of the industry's small-est employees."

Employees? Cjoi thought. She shook her head at the idea of it. She hadn't gotten paid, she hadn't gotten credit. If she had a good day, she got just enough food to survive on and just enough sleep to dream she was somewhere—anywhere—else. The irony was that, since leaving, she only ever dreamt about being back here.

A boy in the front row raised his hand, and Helise pointed to him. "Why didn't they just use machines to scoop them up?" he said, his accent upperclass Haudie South.

"For one thing, the fractally complex branches of the Pahlati Diamonds are very fragile. They are also razor-sharp. A machine that could collect and hold them without breaking off tips and spires would be very, very expensive to build."

Cjoi glanced down at her hands, palms up, and the myriad scars from cuts and cold-burns that criss-crossed them, cobwebs etched into her mottled skin where the Diamonds had sliced through her gloves year after year. *Sharp, oh yes*, she thought. *And humans are so much cheaper than machines, both to buy and to replace.*

"Now, I'm sure all of you came here because of the Pahlati Diamonds, and by now probably have already seen our collection of recovered specimens in our gallery on C Deck," Helise continued, "but it may not be clear why the Protectorate is involved here. Our mission is the preservation of unique and endangered ecosystems. Does anyone know how that relates to Pahlati?"

The front-row boy spoke up again. "Because it's alive?" he said.

"What's alive?" Helise asked, crouching at the edge of the stage in front of him.

"The Diamond!"

"Right!" Helise grinned. "You're very smart. The diamonds are not geological artifacts at all, but the byproducts of a living organism." She stood, pacing back to the lectern, and clicked up a slide of tiny, bluish spheres. "The Diamonds begin life as a tiny gaseous polyp in the upper atmosphere, sort of like a tiny limbless jellyfish, if anyone knows what that is. It feeds on skymoss spores and whatever aeroplankton it comes into contact with, which means they're almost always found along the edges of the stronger updraft zones where there's more mixing of materials."

Click. A new picture appeared, this time of the clouds from above, glistening under a rising sun.

"So does anyone know how these tiny polyps turn into these complicated crystalline structures? Or why?"

No hand from the audience this time. Helise crouched again, in front of the Haudie boy. "Do you know what a pearl is?" she asked.

"A bead," he said.

"Well, yes." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a pearl, magnified on the screen behind her, and held it out to the boy. *She must have done this a thousand times*, Cjoi thought. Part of her wondered if she'd planted the boy in the front row, or at least herded the family in that direction. But no, it was just that Helise was that good. *Good with people, comfortable in her own skin. This is her element. Not mine.*

Watching Helise explain pearls made her want to take her to the ocean, find her pearls of her own—real ones—and try to claim some small corner of Helise's comfort zone to curl up in and rest.

"... polyp, as it expands, builds its diamond shell by an organic process of crystal vapor deposition. It serves to protect the polyp's thin outer membranes, and acts as a mechanism for the polyp to excrete and contain elements that would otherwise be toxic in concentration. The exquisite structure you see behind me is the end result, although no two are the same. The older the polyp, the larger and more ornate the

diamond shell. Also, the harder they are to find. Do you know why?"

One of the adults in the third row raised his hand. "Because they break," he said.

"Yes," Helise said. "While the external edges of the shell are very fragile, the base that envelops most of the polyp is, literally, as hard as diamond. It would take a significant event to fracture it and expose the delicate interior of the mantle cavity. And yet, ultimately, that's each of the polyps' fate, if not intercepted and removed from their environment."

"What breaks them?" the boy asked.

"Asteroids!" Another child in the row shouted.

"No, something bigger than asteroids," Helise prompted.

"Comets!"

"The answer is the planet itself," Helise clicked again, and brought up a cross-section diagram of Pahlati, showing all the layers of atmosphere in the gas giant, from the magnetosphere down to the metallic hydrogen wrapped around the purely theoretical core. "As the polyps grow in size, they accumulate more material and become heavier. Their shape, concave on the underside, is designed to maximize the advantage of the strong updrafts that create the light atmospheric bands we see on the planet's face. But the heavier they grow, the farther and faster they sink. We're not sure how big they can get, but we do know that, eventually, they will fall far enough that they will be crushed, shattered, by the dense atmosphere. We also know that, lining the interior of each Diamond's mantle cavity, is the next generation of polyps, waiting to soar on the updrafts back to the sunlight. There, they start the process all over again.

"From almost the very moment they are born," Helise finished, "the Pahlati Diamonds are falling to their deaths."

In the years of the *Ama*, the divers had all had large rings attached to their backs, so that after they'd made a good catch the crew on skimmers could hook them and pull them back onboard. Not everyone was successfully retrieved; more than a few of Cjoi's friends, facing despair or illness or increasing attention from the crew as they matured, turned themselves belly-up as they flew, ring out of reach, masters of their own fates at last.

Now, Cjoi had tech on her side. *Or, technically, above my head*, she thought. The sphere, linked to her through her wrist controls, would stay a half kil overhead as she rose and fell, and hunted.

When she was ready, she could call it down to pick her up, and she'd return to the rest of human space with the largest Pahlati Diamond ever seen. It would be all hers, and she and the other *Ama* girls would be remembered at last, and forever.

She spread her arms and legs out, letting the thick fabric between them unfurl and fill with the wind. She had never been this far down before, or felt so high.

Cjoi soared.

The upper left field of her goggles kept a translucent scanner map up, showing wind conditions, changes in pressure and atmospheric density, and scanning for any of the deployed Protectorate sensors that dotted the interior of the gas giant. Her body was small enough to pass undetected, and her sphere was kitted out with a fortune's worth of illegal stealth tech, but if either she or it crashed into one it would be hard to stay unnoticed.

The rest of her goggles were set to enhance what little existing light remained this deep, and mark out anything ahead of her with the faint heat signature and density of the Diamonds.

She had expected to be able to take her pick of the best and most beautiful of many, but for the longest time she saw nothing at all. *Am I in the wrong place?* she

wondered, but she had a lifetime of gut instinct to know she was not.

The idea that Helise was right, and the Diamonds were nearly extinct, began to creep like a shiver up the back of her mind, and fearing failure—*after all this!*—she pulled her elbows and knees in, cannonballing, and let herself drop faster and further.

Helise turned off the diagram, letting it go back to the live vista of the planet below. "This is why the Protectorate is here," she said. "The larger and more valuable the specimen on the black market, the more its loss reduces the next generation. Even today, despite our patrols, and our aggressive pursuit of Diamond poachers, their numbers continue to dwindle toward dangerously low numbers."

"Can't you put them back?" the boy asked.

"The creature itself is very delicate. Take it out of the planet's atmosphere, and they die almost instantly. Also, the Diamonds need a certain population density to reproduce; from the time they reach about four centimeters in interior diameter, they begin releasing spores into the air; as others take those spores in with other atmospheric and organic material, it fertilizes the growing polyps inside. Fewer Diamonds means less spores, fewer viable polyps, and the cycle continues to degrade. We've tried—"

She was interrupted by a familiar figure stepping up on stage. "Hello, gentlepeoples!" Ryon called out when he reached her mic. He was wearing his uniform now, and he looked like a holonovel hero in it, too perfect to be entirely real. "I just got back from some planetary science work and need to go out to meet our supply ship, but I wanted to check in and see how everyone is doing. Are you learning lots of good things tonight?"

There was a smattering of yeses and clapping from the audience. Ryon stood beside Helise, snuck an arm around her waist. "Helise here is the Protectorate's best and brightest," he said, "but you have a rare treat here with you, among you, tonight."

Cjoi saw Helise's expression change, figuring out where Ryon was going just moments after she had herself. Helise started to shake her head, opening her mouth to speak, but Ryon was ahead of her. "Up there, at the very back, we have the last of the *Ama* divers!"

A spotlight zoomed in on her, and she was blinded. She threw an arm up over her face, and scrambled to get out of her chair, intent on fleeing.

"She's coming down to tell us about what it was really like, in the golden age of Pahlati," Ryon said, and more of the audience began to clap and cheer. He jumped down off the stage and intercepted her, holding out his hand.

Reluctantly, she let Ryon guide her up onto the stage, pulling her hand free of his as soon as she was up. Helise moved to stand beside her, and her hand replaced Ryon's, squeezing gently, as if to say either *I'm sorry* or *I'm here*.

"So, tell us," Ryon said, directing the mic at her. "What was it like?"

She took a deep breath, trying not to stare out at the sea of expectant faces in front of her. When the words came, they were calm, clear, and relentless.

"No one knows how many of us there were to start with, but many hundreds. We were all either stolen or bought as small children, and taken to an illegal genmod lab outside of Alliance space. We were all girls, because girls are cheaper to buy, and fewer people care about what is done to us, and because we handled modding and radiation better than boys. Those of us who survived their 'treatments'—one hundred and sixty-four of us—were then brought to Pahlati," she said. "Many of us were too young to even remember our real names, so we named each other, and tried to be a family. We were cold and hungry, and we were beaten if we didn't find good-sized Diamonds, or if we damaged them. A few of us who were too clumsy were killed, in cold blood, to motivate us to be more careful. Most of the rest of us died out there, in the clouds, freezing or having our lungs fill with carbon dioxide too heavy to exhale, or

on the floor of our dormitory after a dive, decompressing too fast, or our lungs collapsing, or from an embolism or nitrogen narcosis or just from too much exhaustion and malnutrition and radiation and despair. Our masters made a fortune off our work, and we didn't even own the clothes on our backs. There were seventeen of us left alive when the Protectorate raided the Giardal ships, broken and abused and half-feral adolescents. We spent six years here, in a special Protectorate rehabilitation facility, learning to read and write and take care of ourselves, learning how to be human. I am the last still alive. That, there, is what your golden age was like."

Letting go of Helise's hand, she stepped off the stage and walked out of the auditorium, leaving dead silence in her wake.

Her suit display was a frantic chorus of yellow pressure-warning lights when she found the Diamonds at last, a loose cluster dropping down through the clouds a half-kil away. The smallest of them was easily bigger than the Orbach Diamond, and the largest . . .

My grail, she thought. Unfurling her suit again, she halted her plummet, gliding laterally now toward the cluster. Nothing mattered, now, except that one falling Diamond. She was the hunter, the predator, the power. *One final time.*

The cluster blinked out.

"What the hell?" she swore. Her lungs full of foam, she could only mouth the words. The mouthpiece picked up the movements and translated them in her own synthesized voice, so quickly it seemed exactly and always her own.

The Diamonds couldn't just disappear. *Could they?* She pulled back the zoom on her goggles, and found her answer: a large ship, also running dark, had parked itself between her and them. She repeated her oath; her momentum was going to carry her straight into it. Using her suit's folds, she did her best to slow herself down as she flew, and to try to gain altitude. She was mere meters above the large engines as she crashed into the back hull. Scrambling, she got her feet up against it and switched on her magboots, adhering instantly to the slippery surface.

Straightening, she walked up the hull away from the heat and radiation of the engines, and toward answers.

Painted on the ship's exterior in letters taller than she was, she found the word *Veresiel*, and the Protectorate coat of arms.

Ryon's survey ship.

Bastard, she thought. She wanted to pound her fists on the hull, call him out for a fight. Why the fuck did he have to take atmospheric samples here, now, when she was so close? Why *dark*?

She could feel vibration in the hull through her boots, and moments later, a dozen drones launched from the underside of the ship. They were an odd configuration: a standard hauler drone with a large, transparent dome, open end down, mounted underneath.

Puzzled, then dumbfounded, she watched on full zoom as the drones fell in just above falling Diamonds, and slowly caught up until their dome began to eclipse it. *No, you'll break them, you idiots*, was her first thought. But as soon as the Diamond was within the dome, jets mounted in the top filled the entire thing with a thick, hardening foam. It was, she had to admit, genius.

Each drone now occupied with its illegal haul, they turned back toward the *Veresiel*. Cjoi walked down the side of the hull, staying close enough to the engines that she trusted they would mask any noise her magboots made on the hull, and watched as bay doors opened wide to admit the drones.

Stacked inside, dozens high and wide, layers thick, were more glass tubes, opaque interiors concealing what she already knew was inside. "Oh, Helise," she said out

loud. "Your Protectorate can't catch the poachers because they *are* the poachers." It made sense; who else would have the technology, resources, and inside knowledge to systematically strip the world of its Diamonds? It had taken her nearly all the enormous Giardal Trust to prepare for stealing one.

Sick, she turned her goggles on record as the drones, free of their cargos, picked up new domes and sped out again toward the diminished cluster.

It was clever. Go out on "survey," strip-mine as many Diamonds as you can from well down in the atmosphere. Meet up with the supply ship and hand them off. Once the Diamonds were extinct, sell them slowly off one by one, for huge, ever-escalating prices. *I do hate to miss out on rare treasures*, Ryon had said. An honest liar.

Ahead of them, one of the drones turned and dove toward the Diamond she had picked out. *Oh, no, you don't*, she thought. *That one's mine*.

Running along the top of the ship toward the front, she no longer cared what noise she might make. Racing over the bridge window—no time to look for startled faces, to enjoy that *gotcha* moment—she hit the *Veresiel's* nose and launched herself back out into the air. Cannonballing, she hurtled past both drone and Diamond.

Throwing her arms out, the updraft slammed into her like a wall, and she braced herself as it threw her back upward.

Reaching out both hands, she grasped the Diamond, feeling the spires puncture gloves and skin, just as they always had, as her grip on it closed just enough to hold. *Mine!*

The drone, detecting a larger object than it could handle heading toward it at speed, veered away just moments before collision, and she spun with the Diamond up past it, momentum still pulling her upward.

Something flew past her, horizontally, very close and fast. She spun around and saw the next hull-puncturing missile coming just in time to tuck and drop below it. The status lights on her suit slowly started flickering from yellow into orange; she was getting too low, too close to the recommended tolerances of even her genmodded body and cutting-edge breathing apparatus.

The Diamond's razor limbs cut into her through her suit, sending more warning lights flaring across her display, as she held it against her chest with one hand, to free the other. Quickly, she tapped out the start code on her control for the retrieval sequence, and then deployed her chute.

Once again she was accelerating skyward as the air filled her canopy and lifted her high and fast. She needed to get clear of the *Veresiel* and rendezvous with her sphere, before it caught up.

Now far below her, the *Veresiel* turned and was banking upward. As it finally got its nose pointed at her, another hull-missile—a brilliant lightning-bolt of white in her goggles—streaked up toward her. "You're wasting your time," she said, tugging her canopy supports and shifting her position well out of its path. Even if she hadn't, it would have missed her by a fair width. Would it crest the atmosphere, give away the poachers by their own hand? She glanced up, but her chute canopy blocked her view of it.

Proximity alarms started going off on her link to the sphere. *Shit*, she realized. *They weren't shooting at me*.

She scrambled her sphere out of the way, just in time; it registered the projectile passing less than three meters off its port side. Hitting her would be nearly impossible, and the sphere was nimble enough that it could dodge indefinitely if set to auto-evade, but the sphere would have to stop moving for her to get on board.

They can't afford for me to tell anyone what I've seen, or they lose everything, she realized. *They have no choice but to kill me*.

Using her wrist panel, she tried to open a connection out, but her signal was being

jammed. The *Veresiel* had slowed its climb, recognizing that time was on its side, and it merely had to wait for her to either panic and try to reach her sphere, or die when her air ran out.

"Fuck you!" She shouted down at the ship. "I choose option number three." The option she had always had, waiting for her.

With her free hand, she sent her sphere up and away, at a bone-crushing speed even she could not have survived. When it crested the upper levels of the troposphere, outside the range of the *Veresiel*'s jammers, she opened a comm channel through it, bouncing off the shuttle station back toward the Protectorate Orbital, and Helise's node.

She picked up almost immediately.

"Cjoi?" Helise was confused, her hair disheveled, her room behind her dark. *I've woken her*, Cjoi realized. "Where are you?"

Not much point in lying. "I'm on a dive," she said. "I—"

"You're WHAT?!" Helise was instantly wide awake. "No, no! Tell me—"

"Helise, you need to shut up and listen. I've found your poachers. I don't have much time. I'm sending you the video, which should be all you need to find the rest of the group. You'll understand when you see it. But I'm putting it on an hour delay, before it'll unpack."

"What? Why? An hour—"

"Because I am what I am. You were my only human friend, and I'm sorry I've disappointed you."

"What do you mean, *human* friend? You're just as human as—"

"I don't think I ever quite was, although I tried. Goodbye, Helise." Cjoi cut her off, set the recording from her goggles to upload straight to the station's cache on an ever-shifting frequency to avoid jamming. It would keep sending data until her goggles shut off or died.

Connection stable and no longer in need of the sphere, she turned it around, sending it hurtling back down into the atmosphere at maximum speed. Above her, the *Veresiel* was still in its climb, still thinking it was the hunter in this game.

From this angle, staring up at the engines, she could almost imagine it was the *Ama*. She smiled as the ship suddenly turned hard to starboard, desperately attempting to change course. Her dive sphere was smaller, faster. The *Veresiel* didn't have a chance. It was too slow, would always have been too slow.

Her dive sphere hit just forward of the cargo bay.

Pieces of the ship flew out and down as the *Veresiel* splintered and broke. The sphere emerged from its rent underbelly, deep gouges marking its once sleek sides, panels ripped off, the interior cabin exposed. It continued its fall, unresponsive now, in a halo of debris and glass domes.

Cjoi's suit was all red lights, life-support systems starting to fail, but she didn't care. She could feel the tiny pinpricks of needles up and down her legs and arms as the suit, recognizing a terminal situation, dumped as many painkillers and anti-anxiety meds into her veins as it could. The Calm Cocktail.

She fell, her perfect Diamond resting on her chest, droplets of blood leaving a trail in the air above her. She'd forgotten how light they were, how beautiful. "I got the biggest one, Helise," she said, knowing the words would eventually make their way to her. "For the record."

The remains of the *Veresiel*, broken nearly in two, plunged down through the clouds past her and into the darkness. She could see the heat-signatures of the Diamond cluster above them now, safe and sound, such as it was. *Born falling to their deaths*, Helise had said. *So was I*.

Below, there were flashes of a storm, lightning arcing through the dense clouds.

Breathing was hard, the foam in her lungs starting to feel like cement, or like a billion angry ants, and despite the drugs her body hurt almost beyond what she could bear.

In her hands, her Diamond suddenly shattered, imploding, a million beautiful shards of crystal crushing in on themselves. Around her the air filled with thousands of tiny, golden droplets. Through narrowing vision she watched as they opened like tiny umbrellas and caught the wind, soared up and away, free.

"Show-offs," she said.

One goggle lens cracked, then the other. She couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't breathe, wasn't sure she was even trying any more. She fell into the storm, alone but for her ghosts, and was gone.

Helise caught up with her just as she was about to board the shuttle. "Cjoi!" she called out, reaching her, pulling her into an embrace. "I'm so sorry about Ryon," she said.

Cjoi just nodded. "I'm sure he meant no harm."

Helise let her go. "I'm not ever going to see you again," she said.

"No, I don't think so."

"You'll take care of yourself?"

"I'll do my best."

Helise nodded. "Well, then," she said. "I'm glad I got to see you, one more time, anyhow, my *kinni-inhass*."

"Me too," Cjoi said. She nodded, then, because she didn't know what else either of them could possibly say, turned and stepped through the airlock into her shuttle, and did not look back.

It would be a few hours out to the shuttle station, then two more short hops to where she'd parked her sphere, ready and waiting, for her and her alone.

She felt free, unburdened, master of her own destiny. ○

THE PHILOSOPHER DUCK

Kara Dalkey

Kara Dalkey has been publishing SF and fantasy short stories for nearly thirty years, and has had fifteen fantasy novels published as well, many of them set in Asia. She currently resides in the beautiful and mysterious Puget Sound region with a sweetie and a pixie bobcat. Her first story for *Asimov's* coalesced out of a nebula of inspiration, including the Seven Minutes of Terror that placed Curiosity safely on Mars, and the future plight of Bangladesh due to Global Warming. She tells us, "it was written months before the super-typhoon struck the Philippines. I based my story background on what climate scientists have been predicting for some time—that tropical cyclones might become fewer but much stronger. And, sadly, this may have been borne out, all too soon."

Thunder rumbled to the south. Ravi turned his head and stared. A gargantuan, curved gray wall of cloud filled the sky over the Bay of Bengal, glowing baleful orange on its west side where the last light of the setting sun struck it. The cyclone that the weathermen on the radio claimed had been headed to Myanmar had turned northwest and was now headed straight for Bangladesh. Ravi could smell the oncoming torrent as the wind grew ever stronger. "Chandni!" he called to his wife, "You must finish up the packing. It's coming faster than we thought!" Fear flowed from his stomach to his knees and neck, making him tremble. "Anu! Hurry!" Ravi shouted to his six-year-old son, who was paddling his little boat around the pylons beneath their platform.

"I'm watching the ducks, Bappi!" Anu loved birds.

"No time for that! The storm is coming. Get out of the boat and come up!"

"Yes, Bappi."

All who lived on the Great Pier knew such a day would come. Families who had lost their land from the rising of the sea were encouraged to move onto the platforms built up and out, so that they would not crowd the remaining land. Farmers had become fishermen and salvage divers. Villages grew on the piers built by an international consortium of nations and wealthy men. But there was ever the danger of the cyclones. With the warming of the air, they were greater when they came.

Ravi's grandfather had warned him as the sea rose, saying the future would bring only misery, disaster, and death. But Ravi had a wife and son to look after and could not let despair overwhelm him.

Ravi went inside their reed and twig hut, which shook and leaned with each gust of wind. Chandni had already opened and spread out the rescue sphere, which had been provided to each family living on the Pier. She had already tucked a plastic container of water, cooking utensils, and some clothes into the webbing. She had not been the most attractive of her sisters, but Chandni had proved so smart and practical and tireless that Ravi felt he got the much better bargain over his shallower brothers-in-law.

"Are we ready to inflate it?" he asked her.

"As ready as we can be. Where is Anu?"

"I am here, Mammai," said Anu, coming up behind Ravi. "Bappi, where will we put the boat?"

"We must leave it, Anu. There will be no room. We will get another later."

Ravi paused, his heel above the automatic pump. "Do you want to say goodbye to the house?" he said to Chandni. "It will be destroyed when this goes up."

"I never say goodbye to houses, or hello. It is bad luck," said Chandni.

"Very well." Ravi stomped on the pedal that started the inflation and the great orange sphere began to rise, pushing the flimsy walls of their hut aside.

Anu stared, wide-eyed, his fingers in his mouth.

Ravi paused to marvel, too. These rescue spheres were adapted from those that placed vehicles on Mars—a place that to him was only a cinnabar light in the night sky. And now such a sphere was being used to save people in a storm. At least Ravi hoped it would.

Ravi glanced down the Great Pier. Many of his neighbors had fled toward the mainland, hoping the storm shelters would take them in, especially those who had sold their spheres long ago. A few families, like Ravi's, had remained, and orange and tan balls of rubber were rising out of their homes as well.

The wind began to buffet the hut, whipping Ravi's hair into his face. "Get in, Anu! We must strap you in." Remembering the safety lectures given at the village center once a year, Ravi said, "Put your feet in those rubber loops and hold onto these ropes." Ravi attached the plastic and Velcro straps around Anu's waist. He turned to help Chandni, but she was already strapped in and ready.

As the inflation of the sphere was nearly complete, Ravi reached up to zip and seal the top flaps. Three of the top panels had to be loose on one side, to let some air in. As each section curved closed, a glow stick along each spine cracked, allowing the chemicals to mix and produce a green glow. Just before Ravi could close the final flap, however, there was a furious fluttering noise outside and a black and white tufted duck flew into the sphere with a loud "Mack! Mack! Mack! Mack!"

"Oh no!" cried Ravi and he chased the duck, saying, "Shoo! Shoo!" The duck managed to just evade him even though the sphere was only a meter and a half across.

"Let him stay, Bappi!" said Anu, giggling. "He wants to be saved from the storm too."

"Yes, let him stay," said Chandni, "and then we will have something to cook and eat when the storm is over. Besides, the rain is coming in. Close up and strap in yourself."

"Very well," said Ravi, finishing the final flap. "But you may not be so happy with your choice when he beats you with his wings and scratches you with his feet." As the final gray sunlight was closed off, the interior of the sphere glowed with eerie green light as if they were underwater. Edging around the duck, Ravi strapped himself in halfway between Anu and Chandni, and grabbed the plastic guide ropes. The duck settled itself in the very center of the sand-weighted floor between the three of them, muttering an annoyed "buck . . . buck . . . buck . . ."

A strong gust hit the sphere, blowing it a few feet back. Ravi heard his neighbors call

out to each other from their spheres, "Courage! Hold on! Stay safe!" Then the wind-wall of the storm hit and the cries of encouragement changed to shouted prayers, to Allah, to Christ, to Vishnu. Ravi whispered his prayers to the latter, as he felt their sphere blown off the pier platform. Then, to his shock, it was raised into the air. Anu and Chandni cried out as the sphere bounced against other spheres and the edge of the pier platform, and then splashed into the water of the sea. Through it all, the duck wobbled and jumped and muttered to itself, but never strayed from the center of the sphere floor.

Ravi gripped the ropes tight and scanned the floor for leaks in the dim green light, but saw no water coming in. He leaned his head back against the sphere wall as their craft spun and rose up and up, then down and down on what must have been enormous swells on the sea. Sea foam spat in through the open vents. Rain thundered on the top of their sphere and they could hear screams in the distance.

"Bappi, Mammi," whined Anu, "I'm scared. I'm going to be sick!"

"Don't be scared," said Chandni. "This craft was built by very smart people. It will save us."

"Don't be sick," said Ravi. "Look at the duck. See how comfortable he is? He is not afraid. He knows we will be safe. Watch the duck and you will be all right."

Indeed, the duck had hunkered down in place and other than the occasional soft "ack, ack," did not seem perturbed. Ravi himself watched the duck and found it calming, the strange vision of this odd visitor with the silly tufts of feathers bouncing on his head. Folk tales told of ancient philosophers whose souls had been reincarnated into ducks. Perhaps their visitor had been a grumpy teacher in some former life, thought Ravi. Or an old soothsayer on the temple steps, chiding passers-by to mend their ways. "Maybe you were like my grandfather, eh?" murmured Ravi. "Proclaiming the end of the world, and yet you take a chance and come ride with us. Do you chide us for our fear or for our hope?"

Nausea and worry made a battleground of Ravi's stomach as their craft scudded and rolled and rose up and down and spun and wobbled in the wind. He tried to keep an eye on his son and wife—Anu watched the duck with determined fascination, and Chandni had her head leaned back against the sphere wall, eyes closed tight.

The hours passed as Ravi stood, braced against the storm. He could not say how long it had been when he became aware that the roaring of the wind had stopped. The rain overhead had become only a light patter and the rocking of the sphere was gentle, like in a mother's arms. The duck had tucked its beak under its wing to sleep and Ravi thought that was a good idea.

He was woken up by the whine of an approaching small outboard motor. "Holloo! Halloo in there!" a man called to them.

"Hello!" Ravi called back, hoping they had not been discovered by thieves, even though they had nothing to steal.

"Is everyone all right?"

Ravi glanced at Anu and Chandni, who were awake and blinking their eyes. "Yes, we are alive."

"Good. Does anyone need urgent medical care?"

"No, we are fine!" said Ravi.

"All right, we are going to tow you to shore. Just stay put."

"Who are you? Where are we?" asked Chandni.

"We are fishermen from the village of Mandarmani, near the Rupnaryan River. You are off the coast of the state of Bengal."

"That's more than a hundred kilometers," said Ravi, marveling at the distance they had traveled, south and west. At least they had not become lost in the swamps of Sundarban. The outboard motor roared louder and he felt the sphere pulled in a purpose-

ful direction. Ravi could only hope the men who caught them were not pirates. The duck was awake and looking from side to side with a disgruntled "mack . . . mack . . . mack . . ."

"Just a little bit further, duck," said Chandni, "and we shall all have a good lunch. Except for you. You shall be the lunch."

"Mammi!" Anu protested.

Chandni laughed. "He doesn't understand us, silly. Why should he be upset?"

After a while, the outboard roar lowered to a tiger's purr. A man slapped the top of their sphere. "Still awake in there? We have come to shallow water. You can get out here and wade your way to shore. Is it all right if I open up?"

"Yes, please!" said Ravi, dying to breathe air that didn't smell like wet rubber and old rope. He detached the Velcro straps from his waist. Carefully walking around the duck, Ravi pulled aside flaps and unzipped them, opening up triangles of light gray morning sky. A thin man with a short beard and weathered baseball cap smiled in at them.

Suddenly the duck jumped into the air, deposited a sloppy, smelly poop on the center of the floor, and flew out through the opening. It slapped Ravi's face with its feathers as it ascended, squawking, into the sky.

The astonished fisherman readjusted his cap and said, "I'm sorry. You should have said you had a loose duck in there. I would have been more careful."

Ravi waved a hand tiredly. "That's all right. It wasn't my duck. It was just hitching a ride. Thank you for coming to our aid."

"It is nothing," said the fisherman. "We men of the sea, we help each other, yes? Now we must go help others. *Salaam alaikum.*"

"And with you," said Ravi. As the little white fishing boat sped off in a cloud of oil smoke, Ravi unzipped the rest of one of the side pieces, like the rind of a section of an orange, and he slipped into the water. The warm sea was only as deep as his knees and his feet sank into soft sand. He pulled the rubber plug on a couple of tubes so that the sphere could slowly deflate. "You can unstrap now, but stay inside until we reach shore." Muscles tight and numb from the ordeal, Ravi turned toward a palm-fringed beach and began to walk, pulling the sphere behind him.

"Oh, I am having none of this," said Chandni, and she jumped into the water beside him. "I could not stand to be in there any longer. Like riding in a soccer ball. I am sure the air is unhealthy. Anu, come out!"

"In a minute, Mammi. I found something."

Chandni turned. "Anu! Get your hand out of that duck poop at once! That is filthy!"

"But Mammi, look! I found something!"

"I will not look! You get that stinky filth off your hands at once!"

Ravi managed a dry chuckle, for he was once a little boy too. Anu splashed into the water to his left and said, "Look, Bappi, look! The duck left us a gift." He held up a slimy palm, in the middle of which was a golden ring. On it was a sapphire bezel surrounded by tiny pearls. Ravi took it, waved it in the sea water and looked at it again. It dazzled his eyes and shook his mind with the very circumstance of its existence. "Where could it have come from?" he murmured.

"The duck must have nibbled it with the seaweed," said Chandni. "So many things were left behind over the years, while the water rose. Old Fatima, two houses down, said her husband, on one salvage dive, found a gold bracelet. Too bad the duck flew away—I could have slit its belly and found what else it had eaten."

"Mammi!"

From the weight of it, Ravi was certain the sapphire was genuine. He had never held anything of such value, except . . . he turned to Chandni. "You know, I have never been able to give you any jewelry—"

“Don’t be foolish.” Chandni closed his fingers over the ring in his palm. “We will need to get home and then to buy a new home when we get there. Keep this safe, so no one takes it.”

Ravi slipped the ring into his pants pocket, the one without the holes. The sky turned golden above him and he looked around and beheld a sight as strange and beautiful as the sapphire. The storm was passing to the north and rays of the morning sun radiated from its trailing edge like a crown. Storm spheres were scattered across the calm bay like giant coriander seeds of orange and tan. Cries of “Halloo, halloo” echoed through the quiet morning air as fishing boats slowly and carefully checked each sphere and towed them to shore, across water the color of molten silver.

Spheres from Mars were bearing lowly Bangla fisherfolk to safety. A duck had left a prize of wondrous wealth. They had suffered through a great cyclone’s immense fury, and yet his family was alive and together and right beside him. Grandfather had been wise, but he had not foreseen everything. ○

Tanabata Reunited

**Andromeda spirals toward
the Milky Way,
they may
collide and merge.**

**Then, Tentei will change;
his face will have thick lines,
laugh wrinkles.**

All will say he looks younger.

**Orihime’s river will swell,
drawing magpies to flutter round her
weaving rack.**

**Hikoboshi will be waiting
beside the water
to see if there is
a newly formed bridge.
While waiting he will
write a wish.
A poem that sounds like a hum
that massages his belly
to his throat.**

— Shawn Fitzpatrick



Ian Creasey's tale "Erosion" (October/November 2009) has recently been reprinted in *21st Century Science Fiction* (Tor). The anthology showcases "the new science fiction writers of the new century." Of his latest story, Ian says, "I bought my house a decade ago, it came with a garden, and so I became a gardener by default. I gradually started to enjoy it, as I labored to grow my own fruit and flowers." Thinking about the future of gardens, and what kinds of plants might be grown, inspired him to write . . .

ORMONDE AND CHASE

Ian Creasey

As we waited for any potential customers to arrive, I stared out of the showroom window into the garden full of celebrities sprouting from the soil. This early in spring, most of the plants hadn't yet reached resemblance: the flower-buds were tiny blank faces, gradually developing features. Only the cyclamen—Harriet's self-portrait—was in full bloom. Their pink flowers smiled in the sun, looking cheerier than Harriet had done for some time. A pioneer in pomonics, she'd created all this floral art. But at the height of a recession, few people had money to spare on customized flowers. Most of our visitors came to complain about something.

"Look at that!" said Lorraine Schuster, wheeling a large potted plant into the showroom.

"Ah yes, your mother." I beamed heartily. "Splendid foliage."

"Look!" she repeated. "This isn't good enough, Travis."

I bent down to inspect the plant. As I approached the blooms, I got a strong whiff of Chanel No. 5, Mrs. Schuster's favorite perfume in life. No problem there. I peered at the flower-heads, and tried to remember Mrs. Schuster's appearance from the photographs provided last year. The match seemed close enough, within the limits of horticultural portraiture. "What seems to be the problem?" I asked.

"Warts!" Lorraine exclaimed. "Can't you see them?"

Tiny brown specks disfigured several of the papery faces. "I see them," I said. "Weren't they there originally?"

"They certainly were not."

I glanced at Harriet, hoping she would come and help me out, but she stared at a screen full of genetics schematics, showing no sign of having heard anyone arrive. I'd found it hard enough persuading her to even sit here during showroom hours, and now I wondered why I bothered. She showed less and less interest in the clients who financed her art.

Troublesome customers were my domain as her business manager. As politely as I could manage, I asked Lorraine, "Have you been spraying regularly?"

"How should I know?" she said waspishly. "My housekeeper looks after them."

I took some Vita-Pom from the shelf. "Then tell her to spray against bugs and viruses. As you're a valued customer, I'll give you two bottles for the price of one."

"You charged me a fortune for this plant," Lorraine said. "I refuse to pay extra for whatever fripperies you're trying to fob off on me. Your plants should be virus resistant in the first place."

I looked at Harriet again, but even this insult to her handiwork didn't rouse her.

"If you leave your mother with us, I'll see what we can do." I gave Lorraine my best mollifying smile, and soon found myself smiling at her ample rear as she stalked out of the showroom.

Well, at least she hadn't demanded her money back. It would have been very difficult for us to comply.

"Harriet, my dear?" I inquired.

"Oh, just spray it!" she said, in an irritated tone.

So she'd been listening, after all. I hoped her irritation was directed at the client's lack of aftercare, because I didn't like to consider the alternatives. As I sprayed the plant, Mrs. Schuster's dozen faces all gave me a warty disapproving glare.

I'd just wheeled Mrs. Schuster aside when a man walked into the showroom. He wore black jeans, and a black T-shirt with a logo of a clenched fist. His facial hair resided somewhere in the limbo between weekend stubble and nascent beard. I didn't recognize him as an old customer, but I hoped he would become a new one.

"Good morning," he said. "I'd like to discuss a commission."

"Certainly," I replied. "Harriet, could you come over?"

She grudgingly joined us on the cluster of easy chairs next to the showroom window, overlooking the gardens and the Devon countryside. I poured out three cups of coffee.

"This is Harriet Ormonde, who does all the design work," I said. "I'm Travis Chase, her partner and business manager."

"My name's Dean Hudson," the new arrival said, "and I'm with the Austerity Rebels."

"The protest group?" I asked.

He smiled, clearly mistaking my recognition for sympathy. "Yes, that's right. We've got a great project for you: it's part of our anti-austerity campaign. We want you to create the whole government in effigy. Then on Bonfire Night, we'll burn them! Everyone will do it, all across the country. Britain will be united in protest, and the strength of feeling will show—"

I sensed that this peroration might continue for some time, so I interrupted to say, "The whole government is quite large, if you want all the cabinet ministers. We can give you a bulk discount, but I assume you realize this won't be cheap."

"Unfortunately, we can't afford to pay you." Hudson spread his arms wide. "Times are hard—that's what we're protesting against," he said, as though this was an incontrovertible argument in support of demanding a freebie.

"Times are hard indeed," I replied sternly, "which is why we can't afford to work for nothing." I stood up, dismissing him. "Good day to you."

Hudson ignored this, and addressed himself to Harriet. "Ms. Ormonde," he said, "we're great admirers of your work. That's why I've come. We know you could do a fantastic job of lampooning these politicians. You can make them ludicrous, make them hideous, make them poisonous—anything at all, as long as they're flammable."

"Ah, negative qualities," said Harriet. "It would be an intriguing challenge. There are lots of possibilities, apart from the obvious thorns, stings, and bad smells. To represent someone as rapacious, we can use a carnivorous plant, or a parasite—"

As soon as she said "we," I knew that she was in danger of being persuaded. "Harriet, darling . . ."

She continued as if she hadn't heard me. "Some plants are nocturnal, for those politicians who have something of the night about them. Others are weeds, or they're

invasive, or they flourish in the shade—”

Hudson gazed at her in fascination, or a flattering facsimile of it. “This is great stuff,” he said. “Carry on.”

She was already carrying on. “Then we come to the payload, the part of the plant that actually bears the resemblance. If it’s a root or tuber, you have someone who’s sticking their head in the ground, refusing to see reality—”

“Such as the reality that we can’t afford to give away freebies,” I interrupted.

“Think of it as advertising,” Hudson said. “We’d need lots of seeds to distribute across the country, so everyone can grow the government for their own bonfire. Each packet of seeds would have your logo on it, your accompanying brochure, your special offer for an introductory purchase. You’d reach so many people!”

“And alienate half of our existing clients,” I said, “who voted for the party that you want to burn.”

Hudson raised his hands placatingly. “I can see you’re not convinced, but I won’t press you.” He looked at Harriet and said, “I’ll leave you my card, in case you change your mind. There’s plenty of time—Bonfire Night isn’t till November. It could be a little side-project to occupy any spare moments. I understand that paid work takes priority. . . .”

The showroom door opened, and a woman walked in with a terrier on a long leash. The dog scurried toward us, yapping madly, jumping up onto our legs. I suppressed a smile as it left muddy pawprints on Hudson’s pristine jeans.

“Down, Sprocket,” cooed the owner. “Oooh, you’re so naughty. Aren’t you? Aren’t you naughty? Yes, you are. Get down!”

Hudson hurried to the door, spluttering his farewells.

“Welcome to Ormonde and Chase,” I said to the woman, mentally sizing up her clothes and jewelry to figure out her price range.

“I’d like to commission one of your plant portraits,” she said. “Can you do dogs?”

“Of course we can do dogs. We can do them in dogwood, if you like.” I turned to Harriet. “Can’t we, dear?”

Harriet looked at the manic terrier, then back at me, her face devoid of expression. “Yes, I suppose we can.”

She put Hudson’s business card into her pocket.

When I first met Harriet, she was an administrator by day and an artist by night. She tinkered with plants and grew strange little chimeras: toothwort that looked like fingers, dandelions with smiling faces. I offered to sell a few for her. I didn’t expect to make any money, but I wanted an excuse to see her again. I was already charmed by her earnestness, the way she was equally serious when discussing pomonics or ice-cream flavors. She didn’t have the irony gene that protects people from having to care about anything.

In those days her signature color was turquoise: she wore bright nail polish, and her earrings had tiny dangling gemstones like captive specks of sky. Sometimes she would dye a turquoise streak into her dark hair.

I had no sense of personal style; I just wore whatever seemed least likely to scare off customers. But Harriet took me round charity shops and showed me all the old fashions, preserved like strata, and she picked out shirts for me that actually had more than one color in them. The customers didn’t seem to mind. After all, we didn’t sell paper-clips—we sold botanical art. Our looks were as individual as our artworks.

By then I’d dropped my other products to concentrate on Harriet’s pomonics, and she’d gleefully abandoned her day job. We became Ormonde and Chase, partners in business and in life. As the orders rolled in, I ploughed the money into more land for gardens and greenhouses.

In retrospect, after seeing the démodé goods in all those charity shops, I should

have realized that no fashion lasts forever.

Strolling through the grounds after a long day updating the O&C website, I encountered a forest of prickly cacti with bulbous heads just beginning to develop faces.

I was accustomed to the way the gardens changed each week. Accelerated growth is an essential facet of pomonics, alongside grafts and splices. But I immediately knew that the cacti weren't on our slim list of current commissions.

And our recent orders were conspicuous by their absence. Where was the dog, Samson Rex Sprocket? Where was Mr. Schuster, the companion to Mrs. Schuster that I'd finally persuaded Lorraine to buy?

I searched the nurseries until I found Harriet in one of the greenhouses, smiling as she peered at a batch of seedlings and compared them to the projections on her laptop screen.

I glanced at the seedlings, which were too young to show distinctive features. "What are these?" I asked, trying to make it sound like a neutral question.

"Hi, Travis. These are the prime minister. I've been fine-tuning him for a while, but I think this is the final version. He destroys everything he touches!"

Before I could reply, I suddenly felt queasy and clutched my stomach.

"I've given the plants a subtle odor that creates a sense of disgust," Harriet said. "Whenever people look at him, they want to vomit."

She looked delighted, more enthused than I'd seen her for a long time. I wanted to congratulate her, and leave her to get on with it. Yet I'd seen the latest P&L figures. They were scary—and if we didn't deliver the orders we'd taken, they would become even scarier.

"Harriet, I hate nagging you. But we're running a business here. We need to concentrate on our paying clients."

She sighed. "Believe me, I hate being nagged even more than you hate nagging me. So why don't we just stop doing it?"

"Because I've seen the numbers. We're in a tough situation."

"Well, doesn't that prove their point?" she demanded.

"Whose point?" I asked, frustrated that we'd drifted so far apart I didn't even know what she was talking about.

"The Austerity Rebels. Our business is struggling because the economy is struggling." She pointed to the seedlings. "It's his fault!"

Harriet rarely took much interest in politics. Why was she so enthusiastic about this commission? Had she really become convinced that everything could be blamed on the government?

"I don't think it's the politicians' fault. They're just scapegoats. There's always been an economic cycle." I paused, searching for an analogy that might convince a gardener. "It's like the turn of the seasons. Winter always arrives: sometimes it's mild, sometimes it's devastating. Yet it doesn't last forever. Spring is round the corner. The green shoots of recovery will soon appear." I tried to sound upbeat.

She frowned. "Scapegoats? But if it's not their fault, then whose fault is it?"

"Everyone's," I said. "When times are good, people over-extend themselves and borrow too much money. They make risky investments because they're too optimistic." I waved my hand, pointing to the gardens outside the greenhouse's glass walls. "I bought all this land because at the time, our business was doing well, and I thought that would continue."

Quickly skating past my own misjudgment, I went on, "But it wasn't just that. I wanted to make you happy. I wanted to give you all these gardens and orchards so that you had everything you could possibly need. Yet you've lost enthusiasm. You don't like taking commissions any more."

I tried not to sound like I was blaming her, but inside I was thinking, *Why are you so ungrateful? I gave you everything you wanted, and you're screwing it up.*

Harriet shook her head. "It used to be art. Now it's just a production line. People keep requesting commissions, and they all want the same things. It's always their relatives, or their pets. They all want the same few plants: roses or tulips or dogwood. They all want to be beautiful and colorful in exactly the same ways. They never ask to be spiky or ugly. No one wants to be a wallflower."

"And these politicians are the opposite of all that," I said, looking at the seedlings. "Negative qualities. Thorns and bristles, spines and thistles."

"Exactly," she cried. "I've never had the chance to do this before. I've been looking for something different, and here it is. Unleash the horrors!"

"It's a shame that no one's paying us," I said.

Harriet shrugged. "It's a shame that everything boils down to money."

"Indeed," I sighed. "Still, let's try to make the best of it. If you've already done the work anyway, maybe we should put these on sale."

I wasn't optimistic that many people would want to buy vegetable politicians. Yet any income would be better than none.

"I'm sure you can sell them. You're so good at the business side," Harriet smiled at me. "You'd best plan for a whole range: there's lots of cabinet ministers, and they're all just as evil."

"Hey, calm down," I said, alarmed at the prospect of yet more time being wasted on this. "We can't sell politicians that no one's heard of. Just stick to the well-known ones. And we still need to fulfill our existing commissions—you know, from the clients who are actually paying us money."

"Yes, yes," she said distractedly, her attention drifting back to the baleful seedlings.

These politicians might or might not have wrecked the economy, but they were certainly wrecking our relationship. The prime minister really did destroy everything he touched.

In truth, our relationship had been floundering for some time. It's hard to be someone's lover and also their business manager. When you're nagging them by day, they don't want to snuggle up to you at night.

Put like that, it sounds simple. Stop nagging! I'd contemplated this, wondering what would happen if I stopped worrying about commissions and simply let Harriet indulge herself in whatever pomonic extravagances she fancied. I wanted to do this. I wanted to return to the old days when we were happy and carefree.

But I couldn't convince myself it would work. You can't pay bills with *joie de vivre*.

We just needed to struggle through this rough patch. If we could survive the downturn and keep paying off our loans, then eventually we'd have more freedom.

I kept trying to tell Harriet this, holding out the prospect of sunnier times ahead. She tuned me out. She wanted to spend every day doing exactly as she pleased—not sometime in the future, but right now.

No wonder we're in a recession, I thought. It was pure self-indulgence. If everyone would only knuckle down and try a little harder. . . .

I played my own part, striving to boost sales of our existing range and drum up new business. I held an open day for parents to bring their children. We had a few pop stars and sports heroes that Harriet had created in more enthusiastic days. "Hey kids, if you like Doctor Drumbox, why not grow him in your back garden? Be the envy of all your friends!"

Seeing children wandering around the orchard gave me an idea. Even nowadays, kids still love gathering horse chestnuts to play conkers: they thread the conkers onto shoelaces and bash them against each other, in contests with as much rivalry

and skulduggery as boxing bouts. What if they had personalized conkers, shaped like their own heads, so they could enjoy smashing each other to bits?

I mentioned this to Harriet, with a lukewarm reception. She was busy working on the politicians, because we needed to start selling seeds soon to let people grow them for Bonfire Night.

Dean Hudson visited for several discussions about how best to represent the government in botanical form. He told us the old joke about Margaret Thatcher going out to dinner with members of her cabinet. The waiter requested her order, and she said, "Steak!" Then the waiter asked, "What about the vegetables?" Thatcher looked round the table at her cabinet, and said, "They'll have the same as me."

Despite Hudson's attempts at ingratiating himself, and his continuing pleas for freebies, I remained firm. I insisted that we would sell the seeds rather than give them away. He called me a cold-hearted capitalist, at which I smiled and thanked him. He grimaced, saying that the Austerity Rebels would try to raise money from donations to buy packets for distribution. I offered him a discount for bulk purchases.

In May, we finished developing the seeds and launched them onto the market. Harriet nodded approvingly when I showed her the package's lurid illustrations and disclaimers. "Warning: politicians are poisonous. Handle with care. Flammable!"

Orders began trickling in. A few of our clients called to complain that the product was in bad taste. I reassured them that it didn't reflect our political views—we just needed the money.

To my surprise and displeasure, Hudson kept visiting, even though the seeds were finished and released. He spent long hours with Harriet in the garden. Was he distracting her with more ideas for bizarre products? Or was he enticing Harriet away from me?

That summer, politicians were everywhere. They sprouted on waste ground, on roadside verges, on construction sites where work had halted due to the weak economy. Guerrilla gardeners planted them mischievously in parks and woodland. They rampaged across the moors.

And they grew. Aided by accelerants, they swelled like monstrous triflids. Some were cacti; others were brambles with loathsome fruit. They smothered the landscape, a blight across the whole of Britain. Driving from Devon to London one day, I lost count of how many I saw: in hedges by the road, in the middle of roundabouts, even in municipal hanging baskets. The ivy-based environment secretary grew all over buildings, every leaf looking like his smug fat face.

Business was booming. We'd sold far more seeds than I'd anticipated. Yet I disliked the effect on the countryside. They withered everything around them: you could spot them in a hedgerow by the dieback on either side. I'd assumed that people would grow them in their own gardens, but no one wanted ugly toxic things in their own backyards. They preferred the politicians to ravage elsewhere. But everyone's *elsewhere* is someone's *here*.

When Hudson arrived for another of his mysterious visits, I confronted him. "Why are there so many of these things in the countryside?"

He tilted his head, acknowledging the point. "I know, it's extreme. But it's agit-prop. It needs to be extreme to get people's attention. And it's a perfect illustration of what the government is doing to the country. This is waking people up!"

"Originally you said you were just planning a bonfire," I reminded him. "I could understand releasing a few plants as some kind of one-off stunt, but these things are everywhere. And why do they have to be so toxic? They could have gone on bonfires without needing to be poisonous."

Harriet frowned at me. "It's only a mild herbicide, nothing deadly. They have to be poisonous to make it meaningful. If they were just caricatures, like cartoons in a

newspaper, then that wouldn't achieve anything. You know what happens when cartoonists are as nasty and satirical as possible? The politicians buy the original cartoons, and get them framed to hang on the wall! We need a harder edge than that. I don't want any cabinet ministers putting my plants on their desks in the Ministry of Austerity. I want this to really hurt."

As she spoke, Hudson kept nodding like a teacher proud of his pupil. Harriet had never been interested in politics, and now she knew that politicians bought satirical cartoons of themselves. She'd changed.

Still, Harriet was enjoying her work, almost like the old days. And the unexpected success of the politician seeds had made the business profitable again.

I should be happy. Shouldn't I?

Our new line of merchandise attracted some unsavory clients. One man came in and asked me to put his head onto the most vigorous and invasive plant we could create. He wanted to introduce it into his ex-girlfriend's garden.

I rebuffed him. He said, "Wow, it's a bit late for you to develop scruples, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Haven't you heard? It was on the radio when I parked the car. One of your plants has nearly killed someone."

At first I thought he was simply being unpleasant because I'd refused his custom. But after I got rid of him, I went online to check the news.

It was true. A young child had almost died after putting a politician in her mouth. She was seriously ill.

I shuddered. For a few seconds I stood blankly, unable to think, horrified by what had happened.

Then I picked up my phone. It had been in silent mode during client consultations; I saw that a dozen people had tried to call me in the past ten minutes. Journalists, probably. Perhaps the police.

Looking outside, I saw cars arriving.

After hastily consulting a lawyer, I learned that we probably had no legal liability, as we'd merely sold some seeds. The packaging clearly warned that the adult plant was poisonous, and we hadn't ourselves grown the offending plant.

Nevertheless, our reputation plummeted. Income from selling the seeds evaporated, and we had nothing to replace it. The bad publicity had ruined our business, with many of our former clients boycotting us. I barely bothered to keep the showroom open.

Everything was in limbo. The child's sick condition, blighted by politicians, seemed to represent a sick Britain. Dean Hudson appeared on TV to criticize the government and call for a vote of no confidence in the prime minister.

Harriet moped around, feeling guilty. "It shouldn't have happened," she said. "The foul smell ought to have put her off eating the plants. And they weren't supposed to be deadly to humans. But maybe there was a bad batch of seeds—"

"Or maybe someone interfered with them," I said. "We don't know for sure that it was our fault. Right now, all we can do is help get rid of the things."

I joined a local taskforce going into the countryside to root out all the dangerous politicians. We visited Dartmoor, where the invasive plants towered over the heather and bracken. The conservationists handed out tools, gloves, and nose plugs. We had a safety briefing: "Remember to wear protective clothing whenever you approach a politician."

Everyone started hacking away. It was excellent exercise. We tore the politicians apart, and scythed off their heads. Then we built a fire to dispose of the debris. The cabinet ministers' faces contorted and blackened as the flames consumed them. The cleansing smoke dispersed the stench of corruption.

While the government burned, we sat around drinking tea. I received a few unfriendly glances and harsh words, to which I responded by explaining that I'd never intended our plants to escape into the wild. But overall, the reaction was less hostile than I'd expected.

To my surprise, people were enjoying themselves. Coming out to fight the politicians had brought the community together.

The same thing was happening all across the country. Bands of public-spirited volunteers had united to eradicate the parasites blighting the land. It was the big society in action.

And as we swept away the plague of politicians, the sick child began to recover. News bulletins showed her eating a birthday cake, playing with kittens, and visiting a local park that had been freshly cleansed of suspect vegetation.

It was a neat metaphor—suspiciously neat.

"Looks like a set-up to me," I said to Hudson. "How convenient for you, having a photogenic little girl poisoned by those caricature politicians."

"That's disgusting!" he said. "Do you really think that we'd poison a child?"

"No, but I reckon you'd exaggerate it. How ill was that girl, really? Harriet's plants were nowhere near lethal to humans." I turned to Harriet. "Isn't that right?"

With a tense, pursed expression, she nodded.

"It must have been a mutation," Hudson said.

"Must it?" I inquired. "Funny how the plant that poisoned her was so quickly destroyed, before anyone could analyze it."

I had no proof of my insinuations. But I strove to cast doubt in Harriet's mind, hoping that she would prefer to blame someone else's conspiracy rather than her own incompetence. I wanted her to break free of Hudson's influence, which had caused us so much trouble over the past few months.

"Don't blame me," said Hudson. "I wasn't there. I heard it on the news the same as everyone else."

"You didn't seem very upset about it," Harriet said.

Hudson whirled round. "How dare you? I don't have to stand here and listen to this!"

"No, you don't," I replied. "Let me get the door for you."

Over breakfast the next morning, I said to Harriet, "We need a fresh start."

She nodded. "Let's talk outside."

Harriet led me through the gardens until we reached an unkempt patch of scrub, full of shoulder-high saplings and spiky gorse bushes. The gorse sheltered us from the autumn breeze, its bright yellow blossom a welcome splash of color. Mossy rocks offered themselves as benches. I checked for dampness, then settled myself down. Harriet sat opposite me.

"If we're going to have any kind of a business, we need to start again," I said. "And it's got to be something you're happy with. Forget all the old commissions. What would you like to work on?"

Harriet smiled. "I'm so glad to hear you say that," she said. "I'm tired of trying to make plants represent people. It was a fad—we took it as far as it could go. Now we need to move on."

"Do you have anything in mind?" I asked.

"Yes, there is something. I got the idea from Dean Hudson—"

Seeing my scowl, she hastily continued, "—but I've changed it. You remember how he kept visiting us? He had another idea for customized plants. I didn't tell you because I knew you were already unhappy about the politicians, and I had problems with his idea anyway."

My expression brightened. I was relieved to hear that Hudson had simply been

trying to get more plants, rather than making moves on Harriet herself. Assuming she was telling the truth, of course. But I didn't doubt her. As we sat in the gardens that we'd bought together, all our recent troubles began to seem like obstacles that were already behind us. We would make a fresh start, recapturing the spirit of when we first fell in love, with grand emotions and grand ambitions.

Harriet went on, "I made the politicians smell bad, so people would be disgusted with them. But he wondered how far we could go with that. There's all sorts of pheromones that affect behavior. He wanted to make a plant with a truly revolting smell, one that would inspire a revolution."

I laughed. "You mean some kind of scent to make people go wild?"

"Yes. Except I thought it wouldn't be very ethical to influence people surreptitiously, so I was trying to think of ways around that."

I knew how Harriet's mind worked, and what conclusion she would reach. "You'd have to be honest about the effect you wanted."

"Exactly," she said. "I wondered what sorts of feelings could be evoked, and how to codify them. Then I realized that the answer already existed. The language of flowers!"

I frowned. "What's that?"

"It's a tradition dating back to Victorian times," Harriet explained. "Every flower has its own meaning. Take this gorse, for example." She pointed to the vivid yellow blooms. "You know what they say about gorse?"

I knew that much, at least. You don't live with a gardener without picking up a few country sayings. "When the gorse is in flower, it's kissing season." It's a rural joke, because some species of gorse is always in flower somewhere.

"So gorse means 'love forever.' And there's lots of other plants, all with their own meanings."

"Can you really create pheromones for all those meanings?" I asked.

"Some of them," she said. "In a subtle way. It's not mind control; it's just a little nudge—a way of communicating feelings."

"That's amazing. What did Hudson say about it?"

"I told him that the flower for 'resistance' is tansy. But he wanted to put the scent into everything, including all the politician seeds, and make it as strong as possible." She sighed. "I turned him down. He was rather angry."

"Is there a flower for that?" I asked jokingly.

"Petunia," she replied, grinning.

"There's one for everything!" I exclaimed.

My mind raced as I considered the commercial possibilities, and wondered how many pheromone-enhanced flowers we could sell. Yet I didn't want to pressure Harriet into anything. I'd learned the futility of that.

"Is this what you really want to work on?" I asked.

Harriet nodded enthusiastically. "There's so many flowers to play around with. It's completely different from what I was doing before."

"And when you've had enough of it, we'll stop," I promised.

"Can I get that in writing?" she asked, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Hey, if I knew which flower represented sincerity, I'd pluck one right now for you."

She glanced around. "Well, you were supposed to ask what these other plants mean, apart from the gorse."

I raised my hand. "Please, Miss—what do these other plants mean, apart from the gorse?"

Harriet reached to the nearest sapling, and pulled off a yellowing leaf with a pointed end. She gave me a challenging glance.

"Hazel," I said confidently. "But what does that mean?"

She smiled, and put her arm around me. "Reconciliation." ○

A Work in Progress

When they blast off,
the great starships are like
heroic symphonies-

Beethoven or Tchaikovsky.

Free of Earth's gravity,
solar sails unfurled, their song
turns to minimalism-

the gradual musical changes of
a Riley, Reich, or Glass.

Passing through our
solar system, each planet triggers
a symphonic movement-

that classical pomp of Holst.

At destination's end,
across our star studded galaxy,
a new world silence,

a blank score waiting for some
latter day Dvorak.

— G. O. Clark



THERE WAS NO SOUND OF THUNDER

David Erik Nelson

David Erik Nelson lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with his lovely wife, tolerable children, and aging poodle. In addition to writing fiction about time travel, sex robots, haunted dogs, and carnivorous lights, he also writes non-fiction about hogs, guns, cyborg cockroaches, and Miss America. His first story featuring Taylor and the government-subsidized time portal, “The New Guys Always Work Overtime,” appeared in our February 2013 issue. That story is now available in several ebook formats and as a free podcast at www.davideriknelson.com/NewGuys.

The New Guy was chipper and upbeat in his khakis and button-down. He was working so hard to *not* glance at my boobs—not even a little—that he had sort of a goofy full-on intensity, like he was trying to pick a staring contest with me. He didn’t look like he belonged in the People’s Cooperative Bookshop at all, and certainly not in our fake after-hours “University of Nebraska Vegans for a More Ethical Tomorrow” meeting. We spent twenty very awkward minutes faking enthusiasm for Earth Day 1995—*It’ll be the 25th anniversary!*—before Rob-o finally showed up, laughed, and explained that he’d invited the guy to join our anarchist black bloc.

“Hi!” the new guy said in that false, bright way late-night infomercial guys have, “Your pal Rob-o tells me that *‘Blowing shit up is your business model.’* Well, you guys are in luck, because my name’s Taylor, and I’m a narc!”

Everyone laughed, including Rob-o, who was waving his hands and saying, “He’s for real! He’s for real! This dude is with the government.”

The new guy nodded and “yupped!” so eagerly that it set us off again. Then I saw Buffalo Bill slouch down in his seat; he was laughing, but his eyes were cold. I knew to watch his right hand as it crept down toward his unlaced Doc Martens. Buffalo Bill carried a little tube zip gun there. He’d made it using instructions from this old improvised munitions manual we found in an Army surplus store in Omaha. He’d used a length of steel pipe for the barrel; no rifling meant no bullet could be traced to it.

I shushed everyone. “Guys, guys, c’mon; I wanna hear what Taylor the narc’s got to say.”

"Thanks!" he chirped.

"So are you a narcotics-narc or a fed-narc or what?" I tried to keep it flirty and light. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Buffalo Bill's hand had stopped creeping, but his face was still stonily impassive. He was tense.

Taylor the narc smiled even broader and just bored into me with his eyes. "I'm with the Department of Agriculture."

Buffalo Bill barked a laugh and relaxed. "That's no narc!" he scoffed.

Taylor shrugged. "Oh-*kay*," he admitted, "I'm more of a 'fed' than a 'narc'—but Rob-o thought narc was funnier. If I catch any of you guys adulterating meat or whatever, I'm gonna narc you crapless. For real. I will narc that shit."

Everyone laughed, half because he was funny, and half because we were relieved.

"Anywho," Taylor said, "The big picture is that I've got a crazy deal for you guys. Who wants a revolution? C'mon, hands, hands?"

He really seemed like he wasn't going to go anywhere until he got some audience participation, so I raised my hand.

"Yes!" he clapped and jumped to his feet. "You're a superstar . . ."

He left a conspicuous space for my name.

"Suze," I admitted, crossing my arms and tamping down a smile.

"Superstar Suze. Rad," He turned back to the others, "Who else? Who else wants to change the world?"

And he kept at it, kept cajoling until all five of us had our hands up, even Buffie Bill. Then he dropped his bomb.

"Supercool, 'cause me and my partner Deke have this time machine, and we're looking for a few good men."

Everyone was quiet then.

"He's not kidding," Rob-o said, struggling to suppress his glee. "He's legit."

"Extraordinary claims," militantly skeptical Matilda intoned mechanically, staring him down from beneath her black, blunt-cut bangs, "require extraordinary evidence."

"No sweat!" Taylor answered. He turned to Rob-o. "Should I show them the orange?"

"Yeah. The orange is pretty convincing."

Taylor the narc clapped briskly. "Right-on. Cool. Who's got an orange?"

No one had an orange.

"Or anything, any fruit or veg?" Taylor expanded. "A snack or something?"

Matilda's boyfriend, hulking John-john, raised his hand tentatively. John-john wasn't really into the anarchist thing, let alone the vegan thing, but he was pretty into Matilda's thing. I had trouble believing *anyone* could be that into Matilda for long, but I clearly was underestimating the joys of Matilda's thing, because John-john was a good-looking guy, and had been helping us for a year, even though it was pretty obvious that most of the meeting stuff bored him blind.

Taylor called on John-john, as though this was a crowded lecture hall instead of a half-dozen people sitting in a circle in a bookstore.

"I've, ah, got a grapefruit," John-john offered. "That's citrus."

"It is indeed," Taylor agreed. Nothing happened, and so Taylor gently suggested that John-john could go and get the grapefruit whenever he felt comfortable doing so. John-john jumped up and jogged to his backpack, which hung on a hook next to the owner's little back office. Taylor graciously accepted the fruit. "Anyone got a sharpie?"

I knew there was one in the jar of pens next to the register, and said so.

"Rad!" Taylor said as he jogged over and plucked it from the jar. "So, we all agree that this is a grapefruit and I've had no opportunity to screw with it." He handed it to me, along with the marker. "Check it out, sign your name on the fruit, and pass it

along." I made a big show of analyzing the grapefruit's skin minutely, smelling it, thumping it with my knuckle. Rob-o and John-john laughed, and Matilda snorted despite herself. I scrawled my autograph on it.

"Excellent!" Taylor enthused. "Have you done this before, ma'am? Have we ever met in the past? Are you, in fact, my lovely assistant placed as a confederate in this audience."

"Not a bit, good sir," I said stiffly, like a girl giving a testimonial in a low-budget local TV ad. I passed the fruit counter-clockwise, to Matilda, and when Taylor's sharp gaze shifted to her, Buffalo Bill leaned in and muttered, "When it comes to me, distract him."

I frowned, because I'm not especially keen on being bossed around by Bill, but I also knew how his mind worked, and if this Taylor craziness might turn out to really be something, I knew Bill was seeing how to get the edge now. I nodded once, curtly, and Bill leaned back, nonchalantly hooking the box of straight pins off the ledge running beneath the *Community Action* bulletin board.

When the grapefruit came around, I hopped up, button-hooked around Taylor, then tapped his shoulder so that he put his back to Bill.

"So," I said, realizing that I hadn't really planned beyond getting the guy to turn around. "What's it like, being a tool of state repression?"

He smiled. "Pretty okay. When we aren't suckling at the teat of the nanny state, we basically just gambol and play all day, like little goats—you know, when it isn't a federal holiday, banking holiday, municipal holiday, postal holiday, religious observance, secular festival, or union-mandated cigarette break." Behind him Bill had finished scrawling his pseudonym and was quickly, but calmly, using his slightly overgrown thumbnail to push straight pins deep into the grapefruit's flesh.

I mugged looking over my shoulders, then leaned in conspiratorially and muttered out of the side of my mouth: "Why does the Department of Agriculture need a time machine?"

"You know," he said, smiling a genuine smile, "No one ever asks me that." I realized that he was a legitimately nice guy right then, despite the khakis and the hard-sell and the two-dollar haircut. Once I saw that, I also saw that he really was actually sort of cute. Somewhere in the last thirty seconds my flirting-to-control-the-situation had become legitimate flirting.

He leaned forward and stage-whispered. "It'll be pretty obvious in a sec, and I don't wanna blow the punch line."

"Done!" Bill barked from his seat, holding the grapefruit aloft.

"Supercool!" Taylor spun and clapped his hands. "Put 'er here, slugger!"

Bill tossed the fruit, and Taylor caught it with two hands, scooping it to his stomach gracelessly. *Someone* had obviously never played peewee football—and not because he was a girl.

"Let's push the chairs back," he said as he jogged over to his seat and dug a boxy yellow Magellan GPS unit out of the pocket of the parka draped over his chair.

"Can I borrow someone's cell phone?" he asked absent-mindedly, squinting down at the GPS's little screen. It was so new he hadn't even pulled off that protective plastic coating yet.

Rob-o laughed and Bill snorted. "We're not drug dealers and day-traders," he scoffed. "We're a totally different species of scum."

Taylor looked up, then paced carefully to the center of the room and fiddled with some buttons. "Oh, yeah," he said, still looking at the screen. "Mid-90s. That always gets me. Is there a phone I can use? I've gotta call Deke."

Everyone looked at me. We weren't exactly even supposed to be in the store after hours, but it was the only place we could all meet privately, and I had keys. "Well . . ." I began.

"It's 1-800," Taylor assured me. "And, for real, if it was long-distance to Tokyo, you'd *still* want me to make this call."

And so I relented, pointing out the phone next to the register. When he picked up the receiver I reminded him to dial *nine* for an out-line and he did so, marveling "How quaint!" under his breath in a pretty weak Scotty accent. I could hear the ring purring—it's a loud phone—but when it picked up, he must have gotten Deke's answering machine, because he launched right into reading the two long strings of numbers off the Magellan. He finished by looking at his watch and then at the Magellan and saying, "It's 21:57:57 on my watch and 21:58:06 on the GPS. Use my watch. Gimme sixty seconds, and then sixty seconds and then . . ." he paused, glanced up at me, smiled, struggled to suppress the smile. "And, um, check this voicemail again before picking me up. I might go get some coffee or something." I blushed and turned away so he wouldn't see. I'm not that easy.

Behind me the phone clunked back into its cradle.

"Okay! Let's all scoot back to the bookcases," Taylor called, pacing out the center of the room and waving us back. "The resolution on these old GPSes is for shit, and I don't know what would happen if a portal opened on you."

I had time to say, "Portal?" and then it happened.

There was no sound that came with it, no scifi *shoop* or creepy little tinkly bells. No sound of thunder. It was just suddenly there, a shimmer in the air that spread like burning oil poured out on a hardwood floor, but vertically, making a shifting window of dappled light as bright as the sun. Everyone was speechless and blank-faced, except Rob-o, who I guessed had seen this trick before. He was pogoing on his toes, grinning like a chimp, and quietly repeating "so sweet so sweet so sweet so sweet so sweet!" under his breath.

Taylor tossed the grapefruit in the air once, like a big league pitcher testing the ball's weight, then unceremoniously thrust his arm into the hanging pool of fire, which neatly severed it at the elbow.

Rob-o clapped. Matilda screamed a hysterical little laugh before clapping both hands over her mouth, and John-john shrieked girlishly and jumped into his chair, shielding his face against the books. I realized that my heart—which had been beating a little quickly—suddenly seemed silent, and I wondered *Did I just die?*, the thought as clear and concrete as a jagged pebble in my shoe.

Taylor seemed unimpressed by having lost his good right arm. "Man," he said, "I *love* the impact of that gag. It always *kills*." Rob-o leaned forward so that he and Taylor could slap a high five, and then Rob-o spun on his heel, doing a giddy little school-boy dance.

Taylor stepped back, his arm materializing as it pulled out of the fiery pool. Once his arm was clear, the portal dissipated like time-lapse footage of a pond evaporating. When it was gone, I realized it *had* made a sound, a sort of crackling, like running your hand through the cushion of static electricity on the screen of a big ole TV that's been running for hours.

Taylor looked at his watch. "Let's no one move for sixty seconds or so, just in case. Like I said, the resolution isn't great on these old-ass GPSes, and I'm not really sure how the portal handles the fact that it wants more significant digits than Magellan can offer." John-john unwound, bashfully stepping down from his perch, but no one else moved.

"I, um, don't usually do a demo in such a little place," Taylor explained. He was talking just to fill the dead air, I think. I wasn't really processing. "No offense," he added, "This is a really swell bookshop, but, um, FYI: This business model isn't super solid. What are you studying?" It took a beat or two before I realized he was looking at me.

"Comp Lit," I said automatically. Guys asked my boobs this question daily when I was working the register. "I'm into alternative feminist recasting of traditional narratives."

"Comparative literature?" He nodded his head appraisingly. "Cool," and he actually seemed to think it was cool—most guys just told my breasts they thought that was "really cool," and then they asked my breasts if they'd like to go get coffee, and presumably be grabbed afterward. Oddly, Taylor focused all of this chit-chat at my actual face, behind which I keep my brain, within which I wondered why I was going deep into hock just to argue semantics in the morning, buy back unopened women's studies textbooks in the afternoon, and torch ATMs at night. When his eyes finally wandered down, they seemed more into what was on my shirt than what was in it.

"You did 4-H?"

"Yeah." I still couldn't feel my heart beating. "As a kid. My family raises sheep outside Paxton. I raised and showed goats."

"You should totally consider starting a petting zoo," he said wistfully, "whisk me away from all this."

And then Taylor's portal returned. He dipped his arm into the fiery water-light again, despite John-john weakly gasping "*Don't!*", then rooted around for a moment, like a guy trying to fish his car keys out of a koi pond.

Taylor pulled a dingy tennis ball out of the shifting, hanging puddle, which again evaporated, leaving only the dim shadow of its crackling.

But, of course, it wasn't a tennis ball. It was the grapefruit, covered in mold, desiccated with age, as though it had spent a month at the back of a dorm-room mini-fridge.

"Ta da!" he said, gingerly holding it aloft between thumb and index finger. I could clearly see Bill's black scrawl under the mold.

"That's a trick," militantly skeptical Matilda said with absolutely no conviction. Buffalo Bill had taken the grapefruit from Taylor and was carefully inspecting it.

"All the siggies are here," he said. John-john came over to look while Rob-o spun on his heels one last time, muttering "so sweet" in apparent ecstasy.

"My dad was a Burger King magician," Matilda said. "Kids' parties and stuff, on the little stage in the non-smoking section. He did a trick like this—but with an orange that turns out to have a dove inside. Or to seem that way. But the same thing, where the birthday boy signs his name on it to '*prove*'"—she used air quotes—"that it's his orange. It's a trick."

Buffalo Bill unclipped the gravity knife from his pocket, flicking the blade out with an icy click. He crouched on the linoleum and cut the grapefruit in half.

"Dude," Taylor said uncertainly, "I totally wouldn't eat that; it's gonna have been in my cubicle's mini-fridge for nine weeks." But Bill didn't acknowledge him. John-john crowded close over Bill's shoulder, but you didn't need to be close: I could see the glints of metal in the still slightly moist flesh of the fruit from where I was standing.

"What are those?" John-john asked, "like, chrono-cicles?"

Taylor, for the first time that evening, was as saucer-eyed as the rest of us. "Yeah; what are those? What are chrono-cicles?"

Buffalo Bill continued to ignore them both, rooting through the citrus flesh with his grease-stained fingers. "Six," he said, "Seven. Nine." He stood, holding out his palm so we could all see the sticky straight pins. "They're all here. This is legit. This guy is legit."

Matilda plopped heavily into one of the chairs.

"Why does the Department of Agriculture have a time machine?" I asked numbly.

"Time machines," Taylor answered, his confidence restored after the brief off-script stage business with Buffalo Bill's straight pins. "Basically, to do this: Test preservatives, culture samples, whatever. Make time for stuff that takes time."

"I thought it would look like a DeLorean," I said lamely. I'd sort of meant it as a joke, but once I said it I realized I'd also sort of meant it for real.

"Yeah," Taylor said. "Everyone does. I mean, after 1985 they do. Then before that there's a phone booth period, and before that you get burned as a witch. The funny thing is that I've never even seen that old movie—"

"You've never seen *Back to the Future*? Everyone's seen *Back to the Future*!"

"Maybe," he smiled his honest smile, "Maybe you could show me *Back to the Future*?"

I could feel myself blushing, because this was the most awkward way I'd ever been asked out. "Maybe—" I began, but Rob-o cut me off, mock-yelling through his cupped hands:

"Maybe you could get a room, Suze!"

"Right!" Taylor exclaimed, clapping his hands and turning back to his audience. "Rob-o is right; I'm not here to drop ye olde timey pop-culture references. I'm here because Deke and I have a master key to the labs, and we're 99 percent sure that you guys can think of something 100 percent better for humanity than insta-rotting citrus."

This caught us off guard; in all the late-night-TV demo shenanigans, it had sort of slipped into the background that we'd been meeting to talk about our next direct action. We'd been planning to firebomb unoccupied cop cars. That suddenly seemed like small potatoes.

Predictably, it was Buffalo Bill who regained his equilibrium the quickest.

"We should kill Hitler," he said decisively. Taylor pulled a face upon hearing this. "I've got a Kalashnikov at my place," Buffalo Bill stood. "I can be back in ten minutes."

Taylor grimaced and held up a hand to stop him. "Yeah, that's good instincts—and I like your pluck," he smiled encouragingly, "But . . . why . . . why not think . . . *bigger*?" Taylor nodded as he said *bigger*.

"How big?" Bill asked, his interest genuine and intense. "How big can the portal get?"

Taylor looked around the room. "Pretty big. And we can pop it up wherever."

Bill sat back down to think.

"Big enough to drive a truck through?" Bill asked. "A van?"

Taylor smiled and nodded eagerly, "Hell yeah, bro!"

"And is it stable? There's no crazy heat spike or weird compression as you pass through?"

"Safe as houses," Taylor assured us.

"So we could drive a van full of propane tanks and blasting caps through it? Pop up at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in 1992?"

"Or McDonald's headquarters back before the clown ate the world?" Rob-o asked.

"Or Nixon's White House!" John-john marveled.

Bill never looked away from Taylor, but he wasn't seeing him, either. He was seeing everything he could tear down with that portal to do his bidding. It was as though none of us were there. Bill seemed to mostly be talking to himself when he finally said, "Or the World Trade Center?"

I don't think anyone else saw it when Taylor's face faltered. Just for an instant his real smile dropped, and he quickly pasted that big marketoid smile over it. But it wasn't in his eyes. His eyes were like a dog's when he jumps off a pier and then realizes how high the climb back up to solid ground is.

"Sure!" He fake enthused, stepping up to slap Buffalo Bill's thick shoulder. "You guys *are* thinking big. I like that. I *love* that! But think about big *impacts*. You can go small and subtle, and have a big result—remember, you've got all the time in the world to run this gag."

And then Matilda, God bless her atheist heart, said, "How far back can we go?"

Taylor frowned as he thought about it. "All the way, I guess."

"Okay. Because I was reading this article about how junk food is basically addictive, right? Twinkies, for example, they're all full of fat and sugar. That's super hard to get in nature, so when we find it—" she faltered.

"I read this, too!" I jumped in. "Fat, sugar, and salt are really important when food is scarce: The fat is lots of calories in a small package, the salt is electrolytes—because so many famines are caused by droughts, dehydration is a problem—and the sugar is quick energy that's easy for the body to extract."

"Yeah!" Matilda said, getting excited, "So this is why people love bacon, or just mindlessly munch chips or M&Ms until the snacks are all gone and they bloat up: Evolution selected for the cavemen that ate all the sugar, salt, and fat they could find because it gave them a survival edge."

"Oh!" Rob-o suddenly sat upright. "That article from *Utne Reader*!"

"Or *Harper's*," Matilda said. "One of them. But now the thing is that those foods aren't scarce, and it turns out that eating a ton of it is super bad for you. Cavemen never had a *chance* to eat themselves fat because they never found that much fat or salt or sugar. Like, seriously, how much bacon is on one boar? And how many folks were sharing it? But we live longer and can buy all the salty-sweet fat we want, and our prehistoric edge is killing us. Obesity, heart disease—all of that."

Bill squinted. "What's this have to do with revolution?" It was a cagey question. I think he already saw where Matilda was going.

"What if we go back to paleolithic Europe, or whatever, with Twinkies. Tons of Twinkies."

"They'll pig out," Rob-o marveled.

"And fatten up," I said. "Lots of them will, the ones most susceptible to putting on weight, like how Polynesians are. The ones that diabetes doesn't get, sabertooth tigers will."

"We can crater the population," Bill said admiringly.

"Exactly!" Matilda agreed. "Think about how far we'd wind back scarcity if we took just 10 percent off the base population pool forty-five thousand years ago."

"Oh!" I shouted to be heard above everyone. "And—damn!—and whoever makes it through does it because they're genetically hardened against—shit, what did the article call it?"

"Diseases of affluence," Matilda said with finality.

Taylor clapped, "Hot damn! Humanity's best Twinkie *defense* is a good Twinkie *offense*! I love it! I *knew* you were my dream team on this. Now there's just the logistics. Sounds like we need a crapload of Twinkies. Any of you guys know a Twinkie farmer?"

And we started planning how to finance this, how to supply it, when and where to meet next. At 11 o'clock Taylor's watch started to beep, and he excused himself—but not before asking me when I'd be working next. I told him I had the afternoon shift at the register the next day, and he said he'd bring me lunch—something healthful and devoid of the Devil's salt, fat, and sugar.

The rest of us stuck around until 3 A.M., drinking beers and eating fatty, salty cheese pizza, and planning out how we'd finance burning the village to save it.

I took a few minutes to tidy up after everyone left—I didn't want the owner, Karl, to think we'd been partying—and then went out the alley door, so I could dump the pizza boxes in the dumpster. Someone shuffled in the alley behind me as I was locking up.

"Hey Suze." The voice was timid, but I still whirled around. Taylor was standing next to the dumpsters, leaning against the wall. He was wearing a different jacket, one too light for the weather, which was sort of weird.

"Shit, Taylor; you scared the shit outta—"

But when he stepped into the light I saw how terrible Taylor looked—haggard and sallow, his hair limp, almost grey under the yellowish security light. This guy was way too old to be Taylor.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry. Are you . . . like, Taylor's dad, or something?"

That didn't seem right, either; he didn't seem old enough to be Taylor's dad, but . . .

"Naw," he said, "I'm Taylor."

I smiled uncertainly, creeped out but still hoping this was just a really weird gag Taylor was pulling. He sort of seemed like the kind of guy that might do that. "You're a little bit old to be Taylor, mister."

He shrugged and smiled in sort of a crooked way that made my blood run cold, because it was *so much* like Taylor.

"I'm Old Taylor is all."

I thought about Taylor, and the slightly off-beat things he'd said, calling a new-in-box GPS "old," expecting us to have cell phones. "Do you mean, like, from-the-future Taylor?"

He shrugged again. "Sure, but Young Taylor is from the future, too; I'm just also old."

"So, like, you're from farther in the future?" I tried my own crooked smile, because I kind of still expected Taylor to jump out and explain about this being his uncle, or something. And, anyway, he was still sorta cute in the way Taylor was cute.

But what I said seemed to upset Old Taylor. He ground the heel of one palm into his eye, the way people do when they've been up all night in a hospital waiting room.

"Yeah, you know, I don't really know which one of us is from farther up the future anymore. I've done this more than him, but . . . I'm not 100 percent sure we're on the same timeline, or whatever. Just," Old Taylor took a deep breath, and smiled an exhausted smile, "just let's go get a coffee or something. We need to talk about Taylor." So I took him to Denny's, because it was close, and open all night, and always filled with all sorts of caffeinated kids talking all manner of crap. Whatever Old Taylor had to say, no one was going to notice there.

Standing in the clear light of Denny's I saw that Old Taylor really might be old enough to be Taylor's dad—certainly old enough to be my dad. The waitress paused before walking us back, taking a moment to look at me, then at him, and then back at me. I saw on her face what she thought of grungy me and this creepy old guy coming into her Denny's at 3 A.M. She gave us a crappy booth by the loud conspiracy-theorist teens.

"So," I asked, leaning over the table, still trying to play it fun and conspiratorial. "Do you *really* work for the CIA or the FBI or what?"

"No," he said, sipping his coffee. "You know, you wouldn't think it but it isn't the luxuries you start to miss when you're always bouncing around; it's the cheap-ass little stuff. That's the stuff that goes first. For real: I don't care when you are, but French press coffee tastes the same in New Orleans in 1812 and Tennessee in 2012 and China whenever—I know that as a fact. It's just roasted coffee beans, ground up, and soaked in boiling water. But powdery, vacuum-paced, mass-produced Chock Full o' Nuts? Nothing tastes like that except that." He sipped again. "And these oddly thick, hyperparaboloid-ish coffee mugs they have at Big Boy's and Denny's and college cafeterias and diners? These things are only mass produced because there's this one machine that spins a certain way to force the clay to form, made by one guy in 1948, because he couldn't get the straight cylinder he wanted. They're a total historical accident, and that guy thought up the spinning part when he was a goddamned ball-turret gunner. Seriously, how many contingencies is that to get one of these cups?" He cupped the mug in his hands like it was a chalice, like in that last *Indiana*

Jones movie. "I love these cups," he quietly admitted, almost shamefully. Then he spotted something at the wall-end of the booth and brightened.

"And pencils!" he exclaimed. "Graphite pencils!" He marveled, picking up the Dixon-Ticonderoga someone had left shoved into the little metal rack of individually packaged servings of jelly. "Factories crank out a cuajillion of these every year, and they aren't worth a dime even, not individually, but do you know what a miracle it is to have these? You sharpen it," he pantomimed this, "You jot something down," he scribbled a swirl on his placemat, "you forget it," he ceremoniously straightened his arm and dropped the pencil in the aisle running between the booths and the two-tops, "and you don't give a crap. In some timelines, the pencil never happened. You wouldn't believe the ramifications of a thing like that. There's no Russian space program—no Mir, and so no ISS—in a world without pencils. In a world without pencils Lincoln's Gettysburg Address begins 'So, a while back . . .' I'm not shitting you," he marveled, "The pencil is a miracle."

"Oooh-kaay," I said slowly. "But I'm worried about this," I scooted out of the booth in a half crouch and snatched the pencil off the floor. "Someone is going to slip on that." I laid it out on the table in front of us.

"But who does Taylor—do you—really work for?"

Old Taylor sipped more coffee, savoring the cheapassness. "Hunh? Oh, Young Taylor wasn't fronting: We're in the Department of Ag. I'm in the Department of Ag—although I'm not here on behalf of them, not right now—and Taylor is in the Department of Ag, and they really did license the portals from the place I used to work in order to culture samples and test preservatives and stuff. Except for a brief thing in China in the future—the future relative to where we started—we're basically with the Department of Ag for all eternity. I mean, so far." He sipped again, and it dawned on me that this guy might or might not be Taylor, and that he also might or might not be sane.

"So what did you want to tell me about Taylor?"

He set down his beloved chalice of Chock Full o' Elixir. "Listen: Taylor's lying to you. He's *in* the Department of Ag, but he was sent to you guys by the FBI. He doesn't think you can really change anything using the portal. The only reason the FBI sends guys like Taylor out to guys like you is to boondoggle you—the official position is 'let the baby have its bottle.' The math or physics or whatever they've got says that you can't travel back to your own timeline-of-origin, on account you never showed up there the first time around—it's a quantum-leap Catch-22 or something. You'll only ever pop into alternate timelines—pointless little bubble universes that are basically harmless, and disconnected from any meaningful continuity. This is their math. This is how they see it. Since everything you'll muck with is confined to its own li'l cul-de-sac timeline, they figure it's sort of a harmless zero-sum. You go back in time, do your little mission—some of which are pretty expensive and ornate—come back, and get super discouraged to see that all your work didn't seem to result in anything. Plus you sound like a lunatic if you try to tell anyone. It's a way of neutralizing domestic terrorists."

I was literally speechless.

Finally, what I ended up saying was, "We're not terrorists."

"You blow shit up. People get hurt. You're terrorists. If you used kittens and balloons to distract cops from acquiescing to corporate hegemony, or whatever, I'd call you sweethearts. But you don't. Even your Twinkie gag isn't harmless: Your plan is to pre-murder billions and billions of people. And it's not gonna turn out as tidy as you think. You can't even imagine how pear-shaped this is gonna go. Let me tell you the parable of Too Many Hitlers."

He was somber, but what he'd said was so left-field I had to smile. "Okay. Sock it to me." That made him smile.

"Back when I first did this, I did it with a guy named Deke. It's sort of a long story, but we'd both run off from this job at a tablet factory in Tennessee—"

"Pills?" I asked, thinking it was maybe a drug-slave thing. I mean, that happened. Or I assumed as much. It didn't seem far-fetched.

He shook his head, chuckling, "No; they're a kind of computer. Little ones you can carry around, with no keyboards—listen, we don't have time for me to give a guided tour of the future. They're little computers and everyone is going to love them. What matters is that Deke and I bailed on that job and ended up in China, and our jobs in China were in a lot of ways crappier than our job in Tennessee, but China was also a lot less . . . morally compromised. So it was better."

"Okay."

"But we still felt pretty bad about this one thing we'd done in Tennessee—not even exactly done; a thing we'd let happen."

My stomach dropped. Things a middle-aged guy confesses to "just letting happen" when he was in his twenties—those are never good things.

"So we decided we'd stop the Holocaust."

I guess I had a look on my face, because he set down his mug.

"Just real quick: How many people did Hitler kill? Off the top of your head."

"Fifty-six million," I said. It was a dumb question, like "Who's buried in Grant's tomb?" Old Taylor's jaw dropped, which I took to mean *How stupid is this bitch?*, and I sort of went off. I'd just had a semester-long course on Genocide and Persecution in the Modern World, and so all the numbers were right at my fingertips: "The Hitlers started out by exterminating all 11 million Jewish persons in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, but after they got their process in place they expanded the project to include 4.2 million communists—both outside and inside the USSR—5.2 million homosexuals and bisexuals, 415,000 transgendered people, 12 million mentally ill Aryans—including at least 2 million learning-disabled children—3 million barren Aryan women, anyone of mixed heritage—"

I stopped because Taylor was shuddering. At first I thought he was holding in the giggles, but then I heard his tears pattering onto the cheap paper placemat, where they made warped little pockmarks.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly as he smeared at the tears with his jacket sleeve.

"You . . ." I didn't really know what to say. "C'mon; please don't be so broken up," I said softly. "You don't have to apologize for feelings. It's okay to be past this macho crap."

Old Taylor laughed and sniffed mightily. "Listen, kid: I was *born* when *everyone* was past the macho crap. My *mom* and *dad* grew up listening to *Free to Be . . . You and Me*." He snorted again, rubbed his eyes, then blew out a long breath. "I'm crying because that's my fault. When Deke and I *started* trying to stop the Holocaust Hitler only killed eleven million people—" I started to correct him; *a lot* of people only thought of the Hitlers as killing eleven million folks, because of those *Schoolhouse Rocks* public service announcements from when we were kids, the ones that were always playing during Saturday morning cartoons—but he held up his hand.

"I know, I heard you; I meant eleven million *total*; six million Jews, five million everything-elses. No program for barren ladies or the deaf-mute, either, as I recall. That's . . . that's fucked up. And that's also on me and Deke, I guess. Dammit." He slurped some more coffee. "Did you say 'Hitlers'?"

I smirked despite myself. "Yeah: Adolf and Adolf Hitler; senior and junior."

Old Taylor stitched his brows. "Adolf Hitler's dad was named 'Aloysius,' or something like that."

"They weren't father and son; they were identical cousins." It was so weird that he didn't know this, because it was the weirdest thing *about* the Hitlers—it was the sort of thing that kindergartners knew.

"Then why were they senior and junior?"

Now it was my turn to stitch my brows. "Because they were born, like, fifty years apart. How can you not know this?"

"How can you believe in 'identical cousins'? That's a crazy thing to believe in. How many 'identical cousins' do you know? That are different ages?"

"I don't know!" I hissed shrilly. "I think the Hitlers were the only ones! Fifty-six million corpses; do you think the world can *handle* more identical cousins?!"

The waitress glided in to refill our crappy coffees. She made a point of making eye contact with me. "Is everything okay, honey?" she muttered.

"Yeah, it's fine; my dumb cousin didn't take his pills today."

The waitress shifted her gaze to Old Taylor.

"I like beans," he said in a *Rain Man* voice, "Beans with ketchup." The waitress shook her head and left.

"Listen: Before the FBI program, when we were just in the Department of Ag, Deke and I really *did* nick the spare keys to the lab, and really did come back at night, and really *did* go back in time to kill baby Hitler. But I'm gonna tell you the truth: *No one* can kill baby Hitler—"

"I could kill a baby Hitler," I said.

"Are you Jewish?" he asked. I squinched my face, because it was a crazy question, like asking "Are you Wampaneg." I'd never even been to one of those re-enactor Jewish cultural festivals. "No."

Taylor shrugged. "Mostly it's Jewish people that insist they could kill baby Hitler—for obvious reasons." He said it so casually—*Jewish people*—like he just saw Jews every day, munching bagels, walking their dogs, waiting for the school bus, cleaning leaves from their gutters. Not just doing reenactments of traditional Jewish rituals for bored high schoolers on field trips, or singing Jewish folk songs in the mostly empty auditoriums at community college diversity fairs. Jewish doctors and Jewish lawyers and Jewish garbage men, Jewish drunks, Jewish fry cooks, Jewish astronauts. This shadow culture, all of these Jews in Taylor's alternate timeline. How crowded it seemed.

Taylor slurped his coffee. "Anyway, we tried, me and Deke. I personally tried four different times. But Hitler is a really charismatic baby."

And then Old Taylor—who really was just Taylor—explained about how he and this Deke guy tried to kill one of the Adolf Hitlers. Taylor said he'd brought a dry-cleaning bag each time, intending to throttle the future Chancellor of Germany in his Austrian crib. But no matter how quiet Taylor was, standing there with his pen-light clamped between his teeth, raising up his bag, the littlest Hitler had always woken up. Every time. Probably, if that baby had cried, Young Taylor would have just stifled it out of reflex, and the story'd be over: In a snap our world would have been just lousy with left-handed, dreidel-spinning gay Communist performance artists.

But Baby Hitler didn't cry. He looked up at Young Taylor with big, round, ice-chip blue eyes and cooed and gurgled and reached out for Taylor to lift him up out of his crib and play.

And Taylor just wasn't Hitler enough to wrap a dry-cleaning bag around the happy chap's toothless smile—even if that happy chap was bound to murder millions upon millions of equally happy chaps. Those piles of tiny corpses were cold abstractions out in the future—or, for Taylor, back in the past—and the Baby Hitler was a live, healthy, happy baby stretching up as hard as he could to just almost set his index finger to Taylor's wondrous cold candle light.

Deke was pissed off at Taylor when he came back empty-handed after his second attempt—"figuratively; I wasn't, like, gonna bring back the head of Baby Hitler.

That's . . . that's fucked up"—so Deke tried it the next night—twice in a row—and couldn't do it either. Taylor tried twice more after that.

"C'mon," I said, "It's the *Hitlers*; I'm positive you could've found *someone*—"

"Oh, we did."

After his fourth failure, it dawned on Taylor that the only guy he could think of that was, without a doubt, really and truly heartless enough to kill Baby Hitler was Hitler himself.

"That's nuts," I gasped.

"Yeah, well," he slurped his coffee, "I was stressed. I'd studied German Language and Literature in college, so . . . it sorta *seemed* like the Universe *wanted* me to talk suicidal Old Hitler into going back in time, killing Baby Hitler, and erasing the Holocaust."

"Did it?"

Taylor paused. "Nope."

It took some doing—you have to catch a Hitler at the right part of his downfall, and you need to hit him with the right argument—but Taylor did it. Taylor did it once. Then again and again and again. Sometimes Hitler killed Baby Hitler. Sometimes he didn't. But it never seemed to change anything: Taylor came home to the same old Holocaust every time.

"And I guess, maybe sometimes he stayed behind to shepherd Baby Hitler. Certainly enough of them ran off, having done the deed or not. We didn't sweat it, 'cause it didn't seem to have any *impact*." Taylor slurped reflectively. He dug a flask out of his jacket pocket and dumped it into his mostly empty coffee. If yesterday you'd told me that the Hitlers *weren't* identical cousins, that really it was a time-traveling elderly Hitler come back to guide and protect his younger self—I would have told you that was the stupidest thing I'd ever heard. Time portals? Old Hitlers taking on young versions of themselves as protégés, protecting their baby selves from a Jewish time-traveling conspiracy? What a load of third-rate *Star Trek* horse shit. But now that I'd seen Taylor's portal-and-grapefruit act, I realized that "identical cousins" really was incredibly stupid sounding. It made no sense, but we all believed it just because it happened to be what happened.

"Then Deke and I got busted by the FBI. It'd never occurred to us that someone else might *also* be doing freelance historical revision. I came back from the chilly lower Danube valley one night—thankfully Hitlerless—to find Deke standing around in cuffs with two Agent Smiths and a bunch of guys in hippie costumes waiting to use the portal. We got recruited on the spot." Taylor frowned. "Or more like drafted. But that's when we got hip to the mathematical models: According to the FBI these back-in-time hijinks were basically harmless, because they spawned their own little bottle universes. That's why me and Deke couldn't get any traction on the Holocaust; everything downstream was happening at somewhere else."

I'm no mathematician, but that made no sense, and I said so: "If going back in time and monkeying around just spawned harmless off-shoot timelines, then why was the FBI bothering with their missions? Wasn't all their portaling just making more useless dead-end universes? Didn't everything that they were trying to prevent happen anyway?"

Taylor shrugged. "We were conscripted; no one answered our questions, apart from to say we were helping to prevent terrorism." I must have made a face, because Taylor held up a hand.

"I know how that sounds, but we were told it was all about 'minimizing loss-of-life in the primary timeline'—i.e., *our* timeline—which we bought, because we wanted to think we were doing good things." He took another sip of booze coffee. "You want some fries or something? My treat."

"Didn't you ever wonder why the FBI had to sneak into the Department of Ag at

night? If it was a legit operation, I mean. Why couldn't they sign up to use it during business hours?"

Taylor took a deep breath. "Well, yeah. But you know how you can be in a really crappy relationship, and after the fact all the excuses and lame subterfuge look really obvious, but when you're in the middle of it, all you think is 'I guess he just likes to take showers in the middle of the day?'"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's sorta how this is."

"Is?"

Taylor looked away, blushing. "A crappy relationship is better than no relationship. Besides, if I quit, I'm locked out, and can't hope to get shit back on track."

"What's that mean?"

"After a few years me and Deke started to worry that the FBI was bad with math, because no matter when we went back to, the Holocaust was always *worse*. Like, according to the model, it should have been the same, because we were going back to our timeline—the 'primary timeline'—and making branches from there. And it wasn't just that it was different: every time we looked it up while on a mission, it was *always* at least a little worse than the last time we checked; never the same, and never less bad."

"It metastasized through the timelines?" I asked, and he winked at me heartbreakingly.

"They'd call it the 'multi-verse,' but yeah, something like that. Maybe it was what we did in Tennessee, or maybe it was all the Hitler stuff, but I'm pretty sure Deke and I sort of . . ." he slurped his Irish coffee. "Um . . . destroyed the integrity of space-time. Or something." He finished his mug.

"Oooh-kay." I sipped my own coffee. It was cold. "So what are you trying to accomplish now?"

"Well, in general, I'd like for someone to kill me—the young me, the me that keeps hopping through portals—and stop adding fuel to the fire."

My heart jumped and the taste of pennies flooded my mouth. For just a second, I wished I had Buffalo Bill's zip gun in my boot.

"I can see that you're not cool with this," Taylor said cautiously, raising both hands. "But listen, you sorta have this enormous karmic debt situation to work out with the Universe: your Twinkie shenanigans are gonna mostly be the end of humanity—and not the easy way." He leaned in, and I could smell the bourbon on his breath over the smell of coffee, and that over the smell of standard-issue stale old-man breath. He didn't *look* that old, but his breath smelled *ancient*.

"Do you know the difference between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon man?" he asked.

I thought Neanderthals *were* Cro-Magnon man, and said so.

"Me too. Until you guys killed off all the Neanderthals with Twinkies and Ding-Dongs. 'Cause, it turned out, the Neanderthals were different. And they interbred. And whatever it was that was cooperative and peace-loving in humanity? Those were Neanderthal genes."

My gut sank. Old Taylor reached out and took my hand—not in a coming-on-to-you way, but like a big brother would at your mom's funeral.

"You guys aren't going to 'sustainably cull the herd,'" he said gently, "and you aren't mercifully banking the fire before it races out of control. You're consigning humanity to perpetual war and famine and brutality. I'm, like, 90 percent sure that my timeline—the Primary Hitler timeline—is the one that you guys strip of its Neanderthal genes. We create war, and war creates Hitler, and then me and Deke go back in time and traumatize Baby Hitlers in all sorts of timelines, making more Holo-

causts. Just a shot in the dark: What do you call the war that the Holocaust was part of?"

"The World War," I croaked.

"Yup." He gave my hand a brief squeeze, then let it go so he could move his cup to the edge of the table, ready for a refill. "They always do. Listen, I've spent *a lot* of time dicking around with the past, and let me tell you: Whatever you do with that fucking portal isn't going to make the world a better place, it's just gonna make it awful in new and unbelievable ways."

This so successfully summarized my personal life to date that I almost bawled. Look at "Buffalo Bill." Before he met me, he was just "Will," and he'd never even been to a protest. But he was the most seriously justice-minded guy I'd ever met. He'd actually read Stirner and Bakunin and Kropotkin and Goldman, and understood them, and had opinions about them that actually *meant* something. Also, he was basically the first guy I'd met since middle school who didn't ogle me and then try to impress my pants off—or at least my bra. He just wanted to talk, to work out these ideas he had from these books.

But boy, did I want to impress *him*. So after our first date I took him up to my dorm room and showed him the slingshot I'd made out of surgical tubing and steel. We went back out and put ball bearings through the dark windows of every corporate fast-food place within walking distance of campus—we both actually were vegans back then. A militant vegan, in my case.

A slingshot is silent and these bearings, they go so fast you can kill someone with them. They pop right through the tempered glass windows with hardly a *tick*, and then the window bursts to confetti. Out in the moonlight, in the silent night streets, it's like magic. He'd never touched a slingshot before—certainly not one like mine—but he was fantastically accurate, and that lit this manic fire in his eyes. That's when I saw he was beautiful, too, and I kissed him.

But the thing is, when you're out to impress someone, you kinda always want to ratchet it up another notch every go 'round. We were *wild* to impress each other. Some folks can't date over the long haul because they aren't a good fit; me and Buffalo Bill couldn't date because we were a dangerously perfect fit.

"Now you see my point, right?" Taylor said. "I'm sure that you'll go and try to tell Buffalo Bill and the others about how bad the Twinkie idea is; they'll end up doing it anyway. But if you—someone *native* to this timeline—keeps interloping young me from enabling these Twinkie shenanigans, then maybe . . ." He shrugged. "You just have to meet me, young me, for lunch tomorrow—" he glanced at his watch "—today, and *Arsenic* my *Old Lace*, then none of your amigos will have access to the portal. Maybe we can start to wind this all back."

"I don't think I can kill you."

"Sure you can. A couple hours ago you were gung-ho to kill *everyone* with sugar and spice and everything nice. How is it worse to kill one guy—one guy that's *literally* asking for it—in order to save everyone else?"

I didn't say anything. I literally had nothing to say, but Taylor read it as hesitation as opposed to what it was: Moral paralysis.

"Listen: You feel that you, personally, can't end a life face-to-face—I totally get that. But you can still kill me. Tell Buffalo Bill that Taylor really *is* a narc—or that he, um, sexually assaulted you. Or whatever. I'm sure that guy would kill Taylor in a heartbeat."

He was right about that, at least.

"Why don't *you* kill Young Taylor?" I asked.

He smiled hopelessly. "I've been trying to for *ages*. Can't you help a brother out?"

And then his watch started to beep. It was the same fancy digital watch Taylor had

been wearing that afternoon, and it dawned on me that Young Taylor probably thought of it as an "old-fashioned digital watch," even though it maybe hadn't been built yet.

"Deke picking you up?"

"What?" He asked distractedly. "Oh, no, Deke . . . retired." He said the last word uncomfortably, the way you'd tell a kid his old dog had *gone to live on a farm* while the boy was at kindergarten.

"You need a ride anywhere?" I asked, dragging it out, although I couldn't say why.

Taylor laughed despite himself. "Naw, I'm good."

"Then I'll walk you out." We stood and I started digging through my bag for some cash. Taylor dropped a crisp blue bank note, like some oversized *Monopoly* money, on the table. "It's on me—" Then he snatched the bill back, muttering under his breath as he dug through his jacket pockets. He finally came up with a crumpled hundred dollar bill missing one corner. Someone had carefully inked an eye-patch, curly mustache, and parrot onto Franklin's shoulder, and inscribed *PIRATE PARTY 2016* along the top of the bill, as though it were part of the engraving.

Taylor looked at the defaced bill, frowned, and then shrugged. "Fuck it. It'll still spend just fine."

Outside we stood awkwardly at the mouth of the alley. It really *did* feel like a date, but not a first date; it felt like one of those dates that's after the last date, when you get coffee with someone you used to date and you both silently affirm that you're never going to split a cocoa or sneak into a movie or make love again. The date where you realize you're both okay with that, but that you're both still somehow linked forever, because you once did those things without knowing there was a last date coming.

There was a crackling, staticky sound by the dumpster in the alley.

"That's my ride," Taylor said.

"What would you do?" I asked. "What would you do if you hadn't already done all the things you'd done? If you hadn't mucked up everything so badly? If you hadn't already spent so many years trying to kill yourself?"

He smiled uncertainly. "What? Here? Now?"

"Yeah!" I smiled. "What would you do if you were just some guy with a portal, some guy hanging out in 1995?"

And then he shook his head pityingly. "Suze, sweetie, I think you've missed the point: Me doing things is what got us into trouble to begin with."

I nodded, because it didn't really seem like there was anything for me to say. He looked away, rubbing his palms into his eyes while taking a deep breath.

"Okay," he said, shaking it out. "Okay. Time to go." He turned to leave, calling over his shoulder, "I'll see you around." Then he stopped and turned back. "I mean, I won't. Never. But . . ." he waved his hand. "I just meant 'good bye' in a casual way." He started back down the alley.

"Hey Taylor," I called. "I'll take care of you, like you asked."

He looked me over and saw I was legit, and his face blossomed into that big, honest smile, the one that came so easily to Young Taylor but hadn't peeked out of Old Taylor yet.

"Thanks!" he shouted. "You're a life saver!"

I made a point of looking away from the alley, so that I wouldn't have to see the dappled, watery light of the portal wedging itself into reality amid the buzzing yellow flicker of the alley's security lights and the rosy dawn breaking across the clear, cold horizon. It was too much light being too weird, like drinking OJ right after brushing your teeth.

The streets were empty. It was that little sliver of morning that's crammed between the last drunks stumbling home and the overly motivated people starting

their morning runs. As I walked I thought about Young Taylor and Old Taylor and what Old Taylor'd said: Whatever we tried to do with the portal wasn't going to make the world better, just awful in a new way. Maybe that was true—it certainly *felt* true in the darkest chambers of my heart—and there was no denying that if anyone should know, it would be Old Taylor, condemned to endlessly wander the portals hunting himself down.

But more than anything, I wondered why folks were always so eager to hop into the portal with guns and bombs and dry-cleaning bags, why we were so eager to get blood under our nails. Suddenly Taylor didn't seem that different from Buffalo Bill, with his zip-gun in his boot and his smudgy Xeroxed bomb instructions. But I wasn't any better than either of them, and neither was this Deke, or the FBI, or the president with his daily bombing runs over Bosnia—none of us were. Why the Hell did we insist blowing shit up was such a great business model?

I'd thought I'd collapse into bed when I got to my place, which was just a crummy little room in a grungy co-op. The communal drama and penny-ante "Who ate my Ramen?" bullshit had seemed like the whole world when I'd left for classes and work yesterday afternoon; now it just looked like what it was: A shitty rooming house in an overpriced college town. Instead, I packed some clothes and my toiletries, then went down to the common room to dig through the jumbled shelves for the "H" volume of our fifteen-year-old, broken-spined *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Camped out in my Honda down the block from the People's Cooperative Bookshop, I figured that I could catch Taylor before he reached the store. With nothing better to do I started leafing through volume "H," and was surprised to learn that the Hitlers' birthday was just two days away. And then I fell asleep.

It was the tapping that woke me up, and Young Taylor's smiling face that greeted me. "Hey Suze!" He yelled through the glass. "The chick at the bookstore is pissed you never showed up for your shift."

He held aloft a pair of plastic bags, the little carry handles knotted into bows. "I brought butter chicken and something vegan I can't pronounce, because I wasn't sure if you were serious about the vegan thing. And that naan bread."

I stiffly unfolded myself from the Civic. "Naan's not vegan," I said, shoving my hair out of my face. "They fry it in butter. But it's okay, I'm not either."

He smirked. "Because you were fried in butter?"

"Hey," I reached out and grabbed his hands around the plastic handles of the grocery sacks. The backs of his hands were cold and smooth; he was so much younger than Old Taylor, it sort of caught me off guard. I wormed my fingers in to press against his soft palms. I'd never realized before how intimate it was to hold someone's hands, all those nerve endings pressed right up against each other.

"What would you do?" I asked. "What would you do if you hadn't already done all the things you've done? What would you do if you were just some dude hanging out in 1995?"

He squinted at me, forcing a smile. "Suze, what things?"

"These things." I let go of his hands and dug the "H" volume from my purse. "I wanna show you something," I said, flicking past "HALOGEN" and "HOLOCENE EPOC," hitting "HOLOGRAPHY," then backtracking to "HOLOCAUST." I held it out so he could scan the page without putting down his carry-out sacks. His smile wilted, then totally crumpled as he started chewing his upper lip.

"Fuck," he said quietly. "*Identical cousins?*" I could tell when he hit "Fifty-six million" by the way his eyes welled up. I closed the book.

"You can read it in the car, if you need to."

"Where are we going?"

"I dunno. A road trip. I met you last night, after you left. Old you." Taylor nodded numbly. "Old Taylor is kind of a total sad sack, but he wanted me to tell you that the FBI's been playing you for a fool. You and Deke both. And that basically the only way to even things up, um, *karmically* is for you to change history without killing anyone." Taylor was very still, the way a firebomb sitting on a workbench is still, even if the fuse inside it is silently smoldering down. "Old Taylor called it . . . um . . . a 'kittens and balloons' operation," I added.

I could see that ticking around in Taylor's head. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The misty plume curled in the cold, bright air. "I'm kinda not that surprised," he said, "about the FBI. They're a sack of dicks."

He had no hat and his hair was a little damp—he must not have thought he'd be standing around out in the cold talking karmic debt—and the close-cropped hair at the side of his neck was freezing into little dark spikes.

Finally he asked, "What day is it?"

"April . . . April 18th, I guess."

He nodded, but still seemed sorta shell-shocked. "1995?"

I smiled. "Yeah, for seven more months, at least. Maybe more."

"Oh!" he was comically, Buckwheatishly surprised. He would have dropped the carry out, but the plastic handles were twisted around his pale white fingers. For the first time I worried about him standing in the cold with wet hair.

He laughed suddenly, but his face was still grim. It was spooky.

"How far is Oklahoma City from here?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "That's two states away. Maybe eight hours. Probably less."

Then it seemed like whatever was adjusting inside of him evened out, and his face relaxed into a smile. His eyes sparkled. "Okay! This is gonna be sweet! Let's go to Oklahoma City," he said decisively.

I could feel the smile stretching my face. "Yeah. Okay. Totally. Why?"

"It's Easter!"

"It was Easter, like, three days ago."

"It's Easter *season*! We've gotta go to OKC! But we've gotta make some calls first, and some more on the way."

And so we drove to OKC.

It wasn't hard to find this Murrah Federal Building Taylor was talking about, because someone had already tied helium balloons to every parking meter on the block, and plastered every light pole with *FREE EASTER PETTING ZOO!!!* flyers. It was drawing traffic. By the time we edged our way into the parking lot facing the building, a few families were already milling around, and a security officer had jogged out to argue with the clowns Taylor had called from Kansas City the night before. While the fattest clown got progressively more jolly with the cranky guard, the others fanned out, sculpting balloon cowboy hats and cutlasses. A pony trailer turned in behind us, and the cop swiveled around to watch it, dumbfounded. He immediately grabbed the handset clipped to his lapel and began yelling into it.

Taylor was out of my Civic before I'd even set the parking brake, toting the mewling cardboard carton he'd had in his lap since Topeka, which he'd labeled using a mostly dry fat-tip marker: *FREE KITTENS! [NOT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION]*. This left me with both the ducks and the goat.

"Hey!" I shouted, but he was already calling out to the cop and Fatso the Clown.

"Officer!" I heard him shout, "Happy Easter Week! My name's Taylor, and I'm from the Department of Ag extension office up in Tulsa! Didn't anyone tell you about the Federal Easter Petting Menagerie?"

And then he was close enough not to be yelling anymore, and their debate was lost

to me. Another clown car pulled in, oooga horn blaring, and I turned my attention back to the nanny goat in my back seat. The Honda was a two-door, and she'd given me Hell getting her in; I was expecting a similar fight to get her out. But I guess eating half a blue vinyl tarp and most of the foam out of the middle back seat chilled her out, because she was remarkably cooperative as I clipped the lead to her collar and urged her to hop down. The ducks, on the other hand, were having none of it. You wouldn't think there was room, but they'd somehow wedged themselves under the front seats, and I couldn't get my hands around them without getting wicked gouged by the rusty springs. Plus duck beaks pinch like a bastard.

The nanny goat, now tethered to the side mirror, eyed me solemnly, bleated once, then shook her head fiercely, spattering my face with stinking blue-vinyl-flecked spittle.

I stood and gazed in wonder at the beautiful chaos Taylor had created with nothing more than a couple of phone books, lots of quarters, and the promise of cash on the barrel head: The pony man had trotted out his two miniatures and already told a nearby mother of two, "Nope; all free—some sort of Easter Parade the city is putting on!" before a cop could get to him and shut it down. A one-man band launched into a pounding, discordant cover of that Hootie and the Blowfish song that was always on the radio, making any sort of police intervention all the more impossible. Security streamed in from the federal building, but they were no match for the two competing clown troupes jockeying for turf in the car-choked parking lot, drawing in children and families from every corner. I guess the building had a daycare or something, because cars kept pulling up with pop-eyed kids pressed against the windows, their mouths distorted with glee.

It was hard, right then, not to love Taylor. I set my hands on the roof of the Honda and arched my back, relishing the sharp *crack* as everything popped back into place. We'd been up and driving at 4 A.M. Across the lot Taylor was smiling broadly, and the cop—miraculously—was coming around. The fat clown produced a novelty bouquet. Just as the cop gave in and reached for it, the clown jerked it back with a flourish. The bouquet had transformed into a bear claw donut, which Fatso handed over like a blushing courter come a-calling. The cop laughed. Taylor smacked him on the back.

Behind them a big yellow Ryder truck cruised slowly up the street. It was riding low, like it was overloaded, and the kid behind the wheel—this scrawny crew-cut in an Abe Lincoln T-shirt, of all things—looked absolutely terrified. He slowed almost to an idle, scanning the crowds of clowns and ponies and kids like it was the most god-awful thing he'd ever seen in his entire life. Suddenly he slammed on the gas, tearing up the block; it was a miracle he didn't roll that truck or hit one of the kids racing out to join the carnival. But no one else really seemed to notice. After all, what's one more guy driving like an asshole?

I was down on my hands and knees, and had just gotten ahold of both legs of one of the ducks, when it happened. This terrible boom, like lightning striking way too close. I was sprawled facedown on the goat-stanking floor mats. Car alarms screamed awake all over the parking lot.

But the sky was clear and bright, and for just a second, I couldn't get my head around what had happened. Then Taylor was helping me up so he could coax the goat back into the Honda.

"Where's the kitten carton?" I asked, dazed.

"I gave it to the top cop," he said. "We'd better go. I don't have money to pay any of these people."

"What happened?" I was yelling. My ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton.

"Terrible shipping accident," he said patly. "Some poor bastard blew his truck up over by the freeway."

"Shit!"

"It's okay; just the driver was killed, and he was sort of a total asshole. But everyone's commute is gonna suck today, and that's a bummer."

I nodded.

"I don't want to drive back to Topeka with the stupid goat," I said. "I'm going to college for a reason."

Taylor smiled. "That's fine." He held the goat's lead high and, with all due solemnity, dropped it. Then he hauled back and slapped her backside hard, sending her charging into a knot of clowns and children. "We could use the extra cover just about now. Get in." Pulling out of the increasingly frantic parking lot, we headed west, putting the rising sun and the column of smoke and the welling sirens all to our backs.

This isn't going to be a guy story, where you kill Hitler to save the world. And it isn't going to be a girl story, where they kiss and wed and live happily ever after. It's just a regular road-trip story, where a couple of college kids drive all day, pull a prank, stiff some clowns, and no one gets hurt. And maybe a little something good happens after that. ○

Lost in the jungle wars
Against encroachment
His leg an empty space
Defined only by memory


Like a wild-hearted bird
Trained with sweet seed
The mutant forest repays him
Colonizes life back into limb

Reddish casting scarabs
Build bone from chitin
Their bug brethren form
Sinews of elastic wax

Flesh made of wingless bees
A skin of interlocking mites
In this way he strides home
On the rebirth of his sole

— Robert Frazier

Phantom Limb



Born in 1949, Sylvain Jouty is the author of five novels and a biography of Hungarian Tibetologist Sándor Körösi Csoma. An avid mountaineer, he has published more than a dozen books on mountains and climbing, including several reference works. For fifteen years, he served as the editor in chief of the magazine *Alpinisme et Randonnée*. His three books of short fiction have won several awards, including the *Prix Renaissance* and the *Grand Prix de la Société des gens de lettres*. Sylvain is a member of the contemporary French fabulist movement *La Nouvelle Fiction*. His work has been translated into Russian, Spanish, Italian, and German. The author's first story for *Asimov's* investigates some unexplored terrain known as . . .

THE FINGES CLEARING

Sylvain Jouty

Translated from the French by Edward Gauvin

When the Finges Clearing was first found, it was immediately clear that the most incredible thing about the incredible discovery was that it had taken so long. If you saw it without knowing what it was (something no longer possible now), it was hard to find a single interesting thing about it, the slightest ounce of “picturesqueness,” much less anything at all exceptional. It was just an ordinary clearing, a pond and the woods beside it, in the beautiful Clarins Forest. For sheer convenience, it was called a “clearing,” but the actual area, once precisely demarcated, was little more than a hectare. Even the plant life on display seemed of no great originality. Admittedly the trees there looked nothing like those in the surrounding forest, which woodsmen had plied since time immemorial, but they were of the same species, mainly beech and English oak.

It was Swiss naturalist Albert Maëdschli who invented the clearing. Until then, Maëdschli had been known—at least to a small circle of specialists—mainly as the pioneer and best representative of historical (or as some called it, differential) ecology, a new discipline that had been gathering interest for a decade. True, in many respects it might seem miraculous to the layperson: with the help of all kinds of clues drawn as much from historical sources as from the meticulous study of a given area, it analyzes countless parameters thanks to sophisticated models generated by powerful computers and manages to retrace the biological evolution of the given

area with astonishing precision. Call it an archeology of landscape, as many aestheticians might have attempted, but founded instead on purely scientific principles. In the same way, the musings of Goethe, Carus, and Viollet-le-Duc on relief contours and the soul of granite have been supplanted over time by precise notions of geomorphology. Strangely, however, even taking into account as it does parameters involving the planet as a whole, or events from halfway around the world (the famous "butterfly effect"), the discipline produces results only applicable to a very confined area.

The discipline would never have developed as it did had its uses been limited to retracing the ecological history of a given biotope. However, it was soon noted that, as humans were an integral part of a biotope, the new science would, in reaction, supply the most useful details on human occupation and its various "modes" over the centuries: thus an entire vein of historical research saw the light of day.

The Clarins Forest is located near the small town of Brenne, which dates back to the Roman Era (Tacitus mentions it in his *Germania*). Nearby is the Bronze Age town of Villars. It is thus entirely within reason to claim that even the remotest corners of the area the Forest covers have been thoroughly traveled ever since humans turned up in the region during the Stone Age. As a resident of Brenne, Maëdschli grew interested in the Forest of Clarins simply because it offered him a convenient terrain for studying the impact of human presence over time on a so-called "natural" area (Maëdschli being perfectly placed to know it was nothing of the kind). His research soon bore fruit; the human influence on Clarins Forest proved significantly different from what local scholars or forest history specialists had written, and in this he found enough material for a noteworthy book.

However, a few points remained unexplained. In certain places, the actual data from the area he'd studied didn't correspond at all with what it should have been according to all plausible hypotheses from the models used. He soon realized these anomalies marked the borders of a fairly specific area, and his astonishment only grew when he saw, to his great perplexity, that he had never set foot in this area although he was convinced he had, over more than twenty years of research, surveyed every last square meter of the Forest. The epicenter of these anomalies was, of course, the Clearing.

This was the absurd conclusion the scholar reached: his study proved—for with the precision of modern science, it was no longer mere conjecture—that no one had ever taken an interest in the Finges Clearing, or more precisely that no one had ever set foot there since the dawn of man. The clearing was literally virgin land, most certainly the last in all of Europe, and perhaps even the world.

Of course, the clearing had probably not been spared the last two decades of pollution insidiously ravaging the earth; but this can no longer be determined as the Clearing has (quite rightly) been declared a preserve. The historical irony is that Maëdschli had picked the Clarins Forest as an object of study for exactly the opposite reason, believing that, as it was close to a large city, human evolution could be read there like an open book.

Such circumstances would have roused, in any man of science, the explorer's old instinct to conquer, to take possession in the sacred names of Science and Progress. And explain, or rather, find an explanation at any cost, which is but another way of taking possession. The Clearing would have been lost. Maëdschli grasped this at once. He took great care never to set foot in the Clearing, and made do with marking its borders as precisely as possible, respectfully pacing its perimeter. He himself admitted to casting glances at it "in which something like the terror men of old felt before sacred mysteries might be discerned." These were his exact words, in the inimitable, slightly pompous, and old-fashioned but sincere style that made his students smile so.

But up until the last moment, Maëdschli failed to suspect his discovery would be of any great significance. For a long time, he even believed he had made a mistake. No

sooner were they published than his findings stirred interest; some thought it a joke, which was why reviewers for a few prestigious scientific journals refused to print it. However, Maëdschli's reputation was excellent; the affair became a debate and, as a result, drew the attention of specialists in other fields, finally entering the ranks of great protoscientific enigmas, in which quackery and seriousness are indistinguishable, to which lovers of the "paranormal" flock in droves.

The ecologist was content to point out a fact; historians wanted explanations. But that was the most astonishing part: there were no plausible explanations. Logically, the clearing, woods, and pond at Finges should have seen dozens of individuals pass through; prehistoric man should have hunted bear there; druids harvested mistletoe; medieval peasants gathered wood, collected acorns, exercised their grazing rights (for the Clearing, its status as anomaly notwithstanding, had not escaped property law). Citydwellers of today and yesteryear should have gone there for a stroll, picked flowers and mushrooms, and made love under the trees.

None of this ever happened. Every time someone approached the clearing, fate mysteriously turned him aside. This did not in any way change the order of the world, nor lead to felt consequences for any individual, except perhaps Maëdschli himself and those who filled the few jobs the anomaly had just created. The fact is utterly insignificant yet intolerable: for some inconceivable reason, which may be no more than inconceivable chance, human steps were without fail turned away from the Clearing (capitalization somehow suits it). There was no more to be found here than anywhere else, nor any less. Of course we have sought explanations, with every imaginable method from the maddest to the most rational. The usual cranks have called on magnetism, cosmic rays, and flying saucers without offering a shred of evidence, or attracting supporters. Perhaps one day another explanation will be found? Can we not imagine, for example (this is a mere conjecture), that the Clearing was a religious site so sacred, so taboo that it was forbidden not only to enter it, but even to speak of it—and that this proscription was secretly perpetuated by some memory buried in the collective unconscious long after the religion that decreed it had died away?

Of all the virgin territories, dwindling daily, that subsist on this cramped planet—a few mountain tops, a few acres of primeval forest—the Finges Clearing is the most surprising and the least known, precisely because it perfectly resembles the perfectly known territory around it. It is the most remarkable because there is absolutely nothing remarkable about it. For the visitor, this is what makes the mystery of the Clearing so irritating: that it should look so much like the woods all around, that in the end there is nothing to be seen and even less to understand. Of course, it has none of the lovely groves rangers are so proud of, since these are result of human industry; it seems fairly neglected, with its weeds and windthrow trunks where toadstools grow, but in any forest one finds such places, left artificially unkempt to give hikers the illusion they are in a natural area. The uninformed hiker will notice nothing unusual—but then no hiker has ever set foot there. . . . Most anomalous of all is its utter banality coupled with the certainty of its radical inhumanity.

Today, tourists visit the Clearing by the busload. A large parking lot has been built beside it. Visitors descending from vehicles listen soberly to the guide's commentary. They read the explanatory signs attentively, like studious schoolchildren, and show the uncomprehending silence of children before a teacher trying to explain, for the first time, a subject that escapes them. Many tourists buy a few postcards that they fill out while downing a can of beer at the snack bar, open in good weather. Then they walk up to the fence that protects the Clearing, and through it—with astonishment or indifference, as the case may be—they gaze upon the invisible. Just for a few seconds; then they take out their cameras, photo or video, to escape the anxiety it causes them to ward off this nonexistent landscape, the very edge of the world. ○

James Van Pelt's third collection of tales, *The Radio Magician and Other Stories*, received the Colorado Book Award in 2010. His most recent collection, *Flying in the Heart of the Lafayette Escadrille*, was released in October 2012.

James has been a finalist for a Nebula Award and the Colorado Blue Spruce Young Adult Book Award, and his work has been reprinted in many year's best collections. The author blogs at <http://jimvanpelt.livejournal.com> and teaches high school and college English in western Colorado. It sounds like an interesting, if dangerous, place to live—especially if the area really is teeming with creatures like . . .

THE TURKEY RAPTOR

James Van Pelt

Leon kept to the shadows on Mill Avenue, avoiding the street lights at either end, walking on lawns so he wouldn't kick gravel on the sidewalk and make noise. In one hand he carried a burlap sack, in the other a can of tuna.

A mountain wind stirred the pines behind the houses, hissing through the dry needles. Decatur was much longer than wide, contained in its mountain valley. Houses ran up the slopes a short way, like weathered lumber and cracked brick waves lapping at the cliffs. On one side the elevated interstate hummed with passing cars and trucks, but other than their lights illuminating the slope above, the residents never saw them. If it weren't for summer tourist traffic, and the county schools at the east end, Decatur wouldn't exist at all. Its heyday as a mining center had ended a century past. No house stood younger than eighty years, and all were designated historic landmarks. Even the tiny bar and the Empty Bucket Café with its five tables sported brass plates on their exteriors touting their cultural significance.

Leon didn't care. His mom had moved them there after the divorce when she had taken the forest service job that made her commute sixty miles home on the weekends from the park. During the week, he lived on his own, an ideal situation for most high school seniors, but it made him angry. He would stalk through the old house with its peeling wallpaper and crooked doorways and hazy windows, glowering at it all. Everyone's related to everyone in the one-exit town, he thought. Bunch of inbred children of mountain hippies.

Now, though, as he tiptoed up the street in the dark, he focused on the task: cat hunting. Feral cats plagued Decatur. People, mostly summer residents, left milk in bowls for the cats, who were said to be good luck, but Leon didn't see them that way. During mating season, they would spit and yowl and keep him awake at night.

He turned the corner onto Seventh, checking under parked cars as he went. Now he walked in the middle of the street, which traveled two blocks before it stopped on the mountainside. He saw the evening's first cat under a new Chevy Tahoe. Definitely a tourist's car. He set the tuna can on the asphalt, flipped the lid open, then stepped back. The cat, black and white with a missing eye, didn't move for minutes.

"Here, puss, puss, puss." Leon held the bag in both hands. When the cat crept out, to sniff the fish, Leon pounced the way he'd practiced so many other nights. About half the time he succeeded. The other half the cat would shoot away like a furry missile. Here, the cat exploded into a rage of scratching and kicking, all claws and teeth and venomous attitude, but the thick canvas contained it. Leon clamped the top tight with his hand, holding the bag away from him in case a claw sliced through. He trotted down the street, keeping his eye out for pedestrians or cars. Explaining why he had a cat in a bag didn't appeal to him.

Behind his house, backed up to the mountain, a low, bowed building leaned to one side. A hundred years ago it might have been an overnight stable for horses, or a place to store a wagon. The door was too narrow for a car. Thick scrub oak shielded the structure from the house, making it invisible to someone who didn't know where to look.

Leon squeezed down a narrow path formed by the brittle scrub oak on one side, and the splintered wood on the other. Just above eye level, a window punctuated the wall. He listened for a moment before moving. No sounds inside the shed. He unlatched the window, pushed it open, and dumped the cat inside. It clung to the canvas for a second before dropping to the dirt floor. The window flopped closed when he released it, and he latched it again.

Inside the shed, the cat hissed, a truly angry sound. A flurry of scrambling, rushing movement. Something thumped against the wood. Another hiss. Then, a cat-like screech, followed by a wet rending rip, as if someone tore a soaked telephone book in half. Finally, cracking and slurping.

Leon pressed the button on his watch to illuminate it. 11:15. He needed to finish his algebra before he went to bed. No time to find another cat.

"Hey, ass hat," said Beau Harmon. He punched the back of Leon's head with his fingertips. Leon concentrated on his book. Mr. Gleedy had assigned *Crime and Punishment* last week, and today was supposed to be sustained silent reading, a time for Mr. Gleedy to check his Facebook page and for the students to do the reading they hadn't done at home. Nothing about the book interested Leon, except he heard there might be an ax murder in it.

"Ass hat." Punch.

Leon hunched forward, trying to move out of reach.

"Ass hat." Punch. "Ass hat." Punch. "Ass hat."

Leon's shoulders tightened. Nothing. He turned to see what Beau was doing. The fingertip punch caught him in the forehead. "Ass hat." Beau smirked.

"What's your problem?" said Leon. Beau wore a flannel, lumberjack shirt with a torn pocket. Leon couldn't stop looking at the pocket. At least his own clothes were well tended, he thought.

"You're a queer bait ass hat, and a waste of space to boot." Beau smiled. His teeth were white and straight. "I'm hoping you'll get pissed off enough that you'll take a swing at me so I can stomp your ass hat head into a greasy spot."

"Get a life." Leon's balls felt like they wanted to crawl up inside him, and he gripped the desk's edge so as not to bolt from the classroom.

"Get a death," replied Beau. He raised his hand. Leon flinched. "Bathroom, Mr. Gleedy," Beau said before pushing from his chair. He threw an elbow at Leon's head

as he passed, but Leon ducked. Mr. Gleedy had looked back to his computer as soon as he'd given Beau permission to leave, so he missed the exchange.

No one else seemed to notice either, or if they did, they weren't meeting Leon's eyes as he scanned the room. Then he saw Beau had left his hat on his desk, a worn Colorado State University cap that had faded to a blotchy green with the Rams logo partly peeled away. It was an ugly hat.

Leon checked the room again. Everyone had their head buried in their books or were sleeping (or texting under their desks, glancing up at Gleedy to make sure he wasn't looking).

Leon slid the hat off the desk and into his backpack.

The bell rang before Beau returned to class, so Leon left without having to face him.

Liselle Benividas wore a black, tight and very short leather skirt over black stockings. She preferred black boots, and she liked low cut shirts that revealed she didn't have much cleavage but way more skin than most girls showed. No one knew her hair's true color because it had changed every month or so since third grade. Today's version featured a light brown with green streaks.

She leaned against the lockers next to Leon while he tried his combination for the third time. It never opened on a first attempt.

"You know the smart girls stay away from Beau Harmon. He's got a permanent case of genital herpes. Beau's an STD buffet. The smart girls, if they see some dumb girl hanging with him, call her Petri dish."

"Why are you telling me this?" Leon couldn't remember ten words she'd spoken to him this year.

"No point. Just saying." She pushed herself away from the locker, put her ear buds in, then said, a little louder than necessary, "He might have a thing for sheep, too. Have you seen how much wool he wears?"

At lunch in the library, Leon cruised websites looking for information on velociraptors. They weren't huge as they were in *Jurassic Park*: three feet tall, but six to seven feet long and feathered. Serrated teeth, like a shark. A mouthful of steak knives. They were related to larger raptors, who had similar characteristics. He spent a long time studying the dinosaur's sickle claws, long, sweeping, retractable, curving bones. One article suggested velociraptors jumped their prey, using the long claws to hook on while they began to feed. The prey might not be dead, even, but die later from blood loss as the velociraptor tore away more and more flesh.

By the end of lunch he'd read four more articles. It turned out that scientists argued all the time. Were the long curved claws sharp enough to disembowel the prey? Did the velociraptor flap its arms, the vestigial wings, to keep itself in place as it fed on struggling animals? Did it hunt in packs? What color were its feathers? Did it have a voice?

They agreed on some ideas, though. The velociraptor wasn't sluggish. It must have been quick to catch its prey. The long tail would have stabilized it when it ran, and it may well have been intelligent. Fast, smart, and built to kill. You wouldn't hear them coming, low to the ground, sprinting on bird legs, until they were on you, which would be too late. Cretaceous back-alley muggers.

Student Senate kids surrounded Mrs. Dorsey, who stood in the library hallway. She taught math for four periods and did student senate the fifth. Her grey hair matched her grey face, which looked even greyer because she wore bright red lipstick. The kids held felt-tip markers and encouraged other students to sign the poster.

"Will you take the pledge?" Mrs. Dorsey said to Leon as he passed, on his way to P.E.

"What are you selling?"

"No sale," she said, brightly. "This is anti-bullying week. If we get 50 percent of the school to sign by Friday, Dunlop Photography has offered to do pictures at the dance for half price. It's a good cause."

A student senate member said, "The theme is 'Mountains Under the Stars.' We're going to turn the football field into the best outdoor dance floor ever, if the weather holds."

On the poster were slogans: NICENESS IS PRICELESS—IT ISN'T BIG TO MAKE OTHERS FEEL SMALL—STEP UP SO OTHERS WON'T GET STEPPED ON, and BULLYING IS MEAN AND SHOULD NOT BE SEEN.

"Are you a freshman?" Mrs. Dorsey said. "The freshmen sign in green, sophomores in orange, juniors in red, and seniors black." She held out a green pen.

Leon shrugged. "I don't like dances."

She didn't remember him. He'd had Mrs. Dorsey for math for his first three years and she didn't remember him.

After the other boys had changed and headed to the gym for day four of ping pong rules, Leon went through the unsecured lockers. He found two twenty-dollar bills in Simon True's jeans that he put back and a quart-sized plastic bag filled with pot that didn't interest him, but he took one of Simon's socks. Simon hung out with Beau Harmon, serving as Beau's chief of staff. Beau provided malevolent intent and muscle. Simon brought the brains, telling Beau when to back off, and mouthing lies that sounded so plausible after. "The kid was hurt when we got there, Mr. Quinault," he'd said to the assistant principal. "Beau wasn't even there," he'd said another time.

Leon took one sock each from two other lockers: Grant Haver and Lewis Lake, both part of the loose group who hung out with Beau. Each had stashed something interesting in his backpack. Grant had a pair of pink panties, which made Leon a little sick. There had been a story last year about Beau Harmon, his buddies, and a girl from the middle school the police found drunk, wandering beside the highway. Leon regretted picking the panties up. In Lewis's bag he found a gun, a small one with a pearl handle like a lady's antique.

Leon paused at the gun, a *serious* breach, like a federal crime, the kind that could get a kid tossed in jail. He placed it back, thought for a second, took the weapon out again, unloaded it, and then returned it. He tossed the bullets in the trash can on his way out to the gym.

During P.E. Leon lost every game, until he played Grant Haver, a biggish lump with a circus juggler's hand-eye coordination, who decided to switch to lefty when he saw he'd drawn Leon. Grant said, "It wouldn't be fair to show him my good hand."

Liselle played two tables down, knocking off one opponent after another with a mean slicing backhand and a backspin shot that hit the table at an angle but popped straight up, making it nearly impossible to return.

Grant won the first six points in a row against a listless Leon who didn't like ping pong, P.E., or Grant.

Grant stuck his right hand behind his back. "Maybe I should turn my paddle around and hit with the handle, or I could spot you twenty points." His served a high-sailing softball next, so Leon lashed at it, sending it toward Grant faster than anything he'd seen all period. Without rushing, Grant returned it too, then looked down the tables at the other players, hitting the ball languidly to Leon without appearing to pay attention. "Hey, Liselle," Grant said. "Did you get those gym shorts on sale?"

Liselle looked confused. "I don't know. Maybe."

Grant leered. "Because if you were with me, they'd be one-hundred percent off."

Leon swung at the ball coming toward him, let his paddle go, nailing Grant square on the cheek. The bigger boy howled and dropped as if he'd been poleaxed. The P.E. teacher rushed over with a towel. "What happened, boys? What happened?"

Leon folded his arms across his chest. The other players stopped as the P.E. teacher pressed the towel against Grant's face, who muttered a continuous litany of "Damn, damn, damn."

"I think you'll need stitches," the P.E. teacher said.

"I don't know," said Leon. "The paddle just slipped."

It was the only winning shot he made that day.

Leon didn't go cat hunting that night or the night after.

Wednesday night, he put a quarter pound of hamburger in a sock he'd stolen—he didn't know whose sock belonged to who—took it out to the shed and dropped it through the window. He could barely see his hands in the moonless night. Stars glittered with the peculiar intensity they were capable of in unpolluted, high country air, not competing with the light wash that hid them in the city.

Inside the shed, something scrambled over the dirt. Its voice vibrated dryly, like a nail rasp drawn across a rock.

Leon worked his way around the building, trying not to let the scrub oak catch his coat. "Do you want more, boy?" he said, as he unclasped the door and swung it open. A black shadow, much longer than a dog, not moving like a dog at all, whipped past him into the dark. Leon took a small flashlight from his pocket and shone it into the shed. Bones, everywhere. Fine, delicate cat bones and skulls and fur. He wrinkled his nose against the smell. Looks like it's time to muck out the shed again, he thought.

By midnight under a camp lantern's hissing brightness that threw sharp edged contrasts everywhere, he'd filled five heavy black plastic trash bags with shovelfuls of broken bones, uneaten skin and scat. He'd wrapped a scarf across his nose and mouth, but it didn't help much.

The turkey raptor appeared noiselessly at the door, watching Leon. Its head moved like a bird's—quick, jerky switches from position to position—but it didn't have a beak, and nothing bird-like peered from its eyes. The library said velociraptors were only about three feet tall, and weighed thirty or so pounds. Must be average height, Leon thought, because when the two-legged creature stretched up, it stood almost five feet tall, and he guessed it weighed more like seventy or eighty pounds. Maybe his creature came from velociraptors' bigger relatives. What caught his eye most, though, were the feathers. When he found it last summer, a third the size it was now, he'd misidentified it as a turkey, not a dinosaur, because in his mind dinosaurs were scaly. The reddish and beige feathers looked as if they were designed for a creature that lived in the desert, not the mountain forests. Longer feathers draped like a veil from the clawed front legs that folded against the turkey raptor's chest when not in use, more like wings than arms if it weren't for the claws, and the tail feathers were also long. They rustled when it moved. Small, form fitting feathers covered its body except for the well-muscled legs and the face; the long, tooth-filled, deadly face that stared at him so intelligently.

The turkey raptor bent around, licking the feathers on its shoulder, preening like a cat.

"Good boy," said Leon, petting its head as he dragged the last bag out the door. The raptor rumbled in its throat.

Rumors about Lewis Lake circulated around the school all morning. "I heard a mountain lion got him," a freshman said while talking to a friend in the bathroom as Leon washed his hands. "A mountain lion wouldn't break through a window," said the other boy. "I think Lewis torqued someone off, and they made it look like a mountain lion."

“Possible. He didn’t have many friends.”

During homeroom announcements, the principal reminded the students to always store food safely and to bear-proof their trashcans. “When you live in the wild, you have to respect the wild animals,” she said. “Remember, they were here first.”

Leon thought about Lewis’s gun. He wondered if he had time to get it out. He wondered if Lewis pulled the trigger on the empty chamber.

Liselle leaned on the locker next to Leon’s for the second time that week. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her face looked drawn and tired.

A student senate member, a perky girl in tennis shoes and rolled up jeans, stopped in front of Liselle, her arms covered in bright yellow, plastic bracelets. “Would you like an anti-bullying wristband?” she asked. “We could really use your support. Half off pictures at the dance if we can get enough kids involved.”

“Choke on it,” Liselle stared at her with eyes so flat the student senate girl froze in uncertainty; then she clicked. Leon thought it very interesting to see—he could almost hear the student senate girl’s synapses resetting—she turned to Leon. “Would you like an anti-bullying wristband? They’re free and for a good cause.” She smiled, pointedly not looking at Liselle who glared into the girl’s ear.

“Sure,” he said, which earned him another smile that flicked on and off like a light switch.

When she greeted the next student in the hallway, Leon dropped the wristband in his locker.

Liselle didn’t look at Leon. “Did you hear about Lewis Lake?” He wasn’t sure at first she’d directed the question to him.

“Just some stories about a mountain lion,” he ventured, not positive she wanted an answer.

“I don’t think a lion did it.”

Leon wondered why she seemed so sad. He tried to think about what to say, but nothing came, so he shut his locker and walked toward class. Before he turned the corner, ten feet away, he looked back. She hadn’t moved. In her hand, which he didn’t notice before, she held a long, sand-colored feather. In the hallway light, it looked almost pink. She twirled it between her fingers, back and forth.

Evidently, half the students signed the anti-bullying poster because at day’s end, the principal announced Saturday’s dance pictures would be half price. Leon read the signatures. Near the bottom on the left, he found Beau Harmon, who had signed his name (Leon had to squint to read it), BEAU F.U. HARMON. Simon True and the two other evil musketeers had signed it too. Beside Lewis Lake’s signature, someone had added RIP, and another wrote WE’LL MISS YOU. A third message, poorly scratched out, read WHAT DO WE EAT? WHAT DO WE EAT? LEWIS MEAT! LEWIS MEAT!

Gleedy passed out an essay question for English class for *Crime and Punishment*. It read, “Discuss Dostoevsky’s use of coincidence as a plot device in the novel. Does it affect the narrative’s plausibility?”

Beau Harmon opened the essay book Gleedy had passed out and began writing. Leon had to admit that while Beau served as a role model for douches and sociopaths, he always did his homework.

Leon glanced at Beau’s booklet.

“Take a picture, dickwad. It will last longer.”

Leon opened his own exam book, and drew a mountain range. In the foreground, stick-figure dinosaurs ran in a herd from left to right.

Gleedy put his hand on Leon's shoulder. Leon jumped. "A picture may be worth a thousand words," Gleedy said, "but at least it has to be about something Dostoevsky wrote. I don't recognize that scene. How about Raskolnikov's or Razumikhin's portrait instead?"

Leon considered stealing from Gleedy, maybe his jacket that hung from the office chair, but he decided the teacher wanted to be funny and kind, not mean.

Saturday night, Leon approached the shed cautiously. He'd never not fed the turkey raptor for two days in a row. He held two socks with a hamburger ball in each, and a Colorado State University ball cap he'd smeared meat on.

When he dropped them in the window, the turkey raptor snarled, a sound that made hair stand up on the back of Leon's neck. He realized he didn't know how fast the raptor would grow (or how much). Sure, the animal acted cute now and let him pet its saw-toothed head, but how big would it get? What if it decided it would be easier to just eat him and not run all over the mountains looking for a good meal, especially ones Leon sent it to find? He opened the door, and the raptor poured out like a black flash.

Leon ran back to the house, grabbed his binoculars. The dance would have already started on the football field. He'd be able to get a good view from a hill overlooking the school.

Through the binoculars, illuminated by the DJ's colored spotlights and strobes, the dance looked more like a play or an animated diorama than real life. Student Senate had strung balloons, streamers, and Christmas lights from poles set along the sidelines. Even a hundred yards away, the music reverberated in his chest. Most kids were dancing, many grinding when they didn't think the chaperones were watching, a dance style involving the girl turning her back against the boy so he could rub himself against her butt.

The breezeless and warm night had to relieve Student Senate. In the mountains, weather remained undependable. It had snowed on this date last year.

Some kids stood or wandered next to the field. Leon recognized a few. He didn't see Liselle, but he couldn't identify most of the students in the darkness and chaotic light. He wasn't sure dances were even her thing, but he did see Beau Harmon standing with a girl Leon didn't know. The strobe flashed them into brilliance and then hid them in between.

Leon hadn't been watching for more than five minutes when several kids at the far end of the football field raced toward a teacher. Leon studied the scene. Two boys in suits and ties, and three girls in long, formal dresses gestured frantically, pointing in the direction they'd come from. The teacher followed.

Leon wondered if the turkey raptor would stay with an attack, or hit and run with so many people around.

Within a minute, on the other side of the field from Leon, the crowd moved. Leon knew sudden crowds in a school often meant a fight had broken out, although in this case he doubted it. Above the music, someone screamed, and then several screams. The principal rushed to the DJ, waving his arms. The music stopped, and in the sudden silence, students yelled. Hundreds of students crowded toward the disturbance, except for a handful who ran toward the school. The DJ turned on all his lights, including the strobe that freeze framed the action. The big field lights flickered, but they would take minutes to grow to helpful brightness.

By the colored lights and strobe, Leon tracked Beau Harmon. Beau peered into the gathering crowd, then ran toward the parking lot, away from the lights and away from everyone's attention. Did he know Simon True and Grant Haver were down? Had he connected the dots? His date clung to his arm for a second, but he shook her off and she fell.

Flash, darkness, flash. Only the strobe light shone bright enough to reach Beau as he ran, incongruously formal for a boy who almost always wore lumberjack shirts and beat-up ball caps. A flash caught the turkey raptor, tail extended, head low, on a charge ten feet behind Beau, and in the next flash Beau was down, the raptor crouched over him like a pale specter. The tableau repeated for a half dozen flashes before Beau's date reached him. Leon couldn't believe anyone cared enough about Beau to follow, but she did. For a flash the raptor stood on top of the body, its jaws rending jacket and the flesh beneath, and in the next, the girl stood beside the remains, hands on her face, frozen, the raptor gone.

Leon packed his binoculars in the case, and walked toward home.

Mountain nights aren't bad, thought Leon, swinging the binoculars lazily as he walked. No breeze tonight, so the trees didn't rustle. He had traveled far enough from the high school that the shouting and screaming faded, although he heard a siren approaching on the highway above town. He wondered what the authorities would make of the mess. Did kids see the turkey raptor? If they tried to describe it, would anyone believe them?

He doubted it.

He thought about cats. From now on he would always find the turkey raptor the best cats, and as it grew he might need to find two a night instead of just making them a special treat.

Happily, he wanted to whistle.

But as he crossed the last street to his block, he grew uneasy, three houses from home. Both street lights were out. The neighboring houses, empty now that the summer people had gone, stared through blank, black windows. On one porch, a wind chime rattled although Leon felt no wind. Behind the houses, up the mountain slope, a crunching, clacking told him rocks were falling. Perhaps it is a deer, he thought, or elk, but he didn't believe it. He moved off the sidewalk, into the street and away from the sound.

Wood snapped behind his house; nails shrieked as they pulled from timbers, then heavy crushing sounds, followed by a familiar animal rasp: the turkey raptor's furious cry. Darkness covered the street and houses shouldering from the night; reflecting light glinted from windows, but the mountain's shadow hid the trees behind, and whatever happened that shattered wood and clacked its giant teeth remained invisible.

The turkey raptor squawked, an utterance Leon had never heard from it. Then the sound cut off. More rocks slipped down the mountain, as if a thing both heavy and fast ran along the slope.

He stood in the street, knowing he'd arrived too late. Whatever happened was done. A shape moving toward him startled him. A flashlight flicked on. Liselle stood before him, a sweatshirt zipped to her neck, and a determined set to her mouth.

"Did you know Lewis Lake was my half brother?" she said. "He's family."

Leon shook his head. She held the pink feather in the other hand. "They can hunt by smell," she said. "Not many people know that. They're nocturnal and hunt by smell."

"What was it?" said Leon, sick with the knowledge of the destruction behind his house. The turkey raptor would have returned, waiting for him, waiting for a petting and a cat. The raptor nearly purred with a cat or two a day. "It was so big."

"Utahraptor. I keep it in an old barn." Liselle faced his house. "Do you know who lives here? Do you know who this belongs too?" She held up the feather.

Leon tried to keep his voice calm, but it shook. He felt it. "No, no idea."

Liselle said, "I'll come back tomorrow to find out. There's a reckoning to be paid. You have to stand up to people like this. You have to show them you won't be pushed around, or they'll never stop."

Leon wondered if he could reach his mother tonight. He'd have to hitch hike. Could he convince her to never come back to Decatur, to the house filled with their odor? He hoped so, he hoped to god, and he was so, so sorry.

He had a vision, and in it a nine foot tall, one thousand pound animal stalked down the mountain highway's shoulder; and it too had feathers hanging in ragged tatters from its tiny arms. It paused and watched with disinterest every passing car, just out of the headlights' reach. The Utahraptor sniffed the breeze, snorted, then stalked on, unstoppable, inexhaustible, relentless.

Leon wondered how far a raptor could go, following a scent? ○

Tea Rex

It emerges out of time
and leaf,

mouth full of steam,

rip-roaring hot
and unsweetened

(no placid chamomile
or lavender here—
those are dried-out beasts
more fit for bedtime
than daybreak),

and not even milk can neutralize
its first bitter taste,

as shot through with tannin
and caffeine

(the more toothsome chemicals
in our rousing brew),

this apex predator of muddleheadedness,
this creature of morning
and herbal dregs,
takes a monster bite out of sleep,
chasing away,

swallow by swallow,

the last remaining brontosauri of dreams.

—Robert Borski



Nancy Kress is the multiple-award-winning author of much science fiction and fantasy, most notably the classic *Sleepless* trilogy that began with *Beggars in Spain*. The author tells us: “Like most SF writers, I occasionally ruminate about time. Like most senior-citizens-and-how-did-that-happen, I occasionally ruminate about things I might have done differently during my life, or reacted to differently, or at least viewed differently.” And because writers tend to ruminate on paper the result of that rumination is . . .

SIDEWALK AT 12:10 P.M.

Nancy Kress

She transfers slowly, painfully from the robocar to the floater, Liam gently helping her. Every part of her body hurts; RenewGen can do only so much, and today she has not taken her pain meds. Liam frowns. He disapproves of this trip, but it isn't in him to thwart or scold her, to be less than kind. Sweetness like honey on the tongue, she used to say of his father, dead now these thirty-three years, his bones buried somewhere under the alien red soil of Mars. Thirty-three years! Where does the time go?

It doesn't. That is, of course, the whole point.

“Careful, Gran,” Liam says.

“Always. After all, I'm not 110 anymore.” An old joke; there are so many old jokes. But this one, she remembers now, was with his uncle, not him, and Liam looks baffled. Sometimes she gets lost in time, as if it were a maze.

It is not a maze. It is a loaf of bread. That, too, is the point.

“I used to make my own bread. Pumpernickel and rye and the most marvelous sourdough,” she tells Liam. He nods, without asking why this is relevant. He knows.

Sarah yells up the stairs, “David! Aren't you ready *yet*?”

David clatters down the steps, shirt unbuttoned, permanent scowl beneath the new, wispy, ridiculous mustache. It looks like half a dozen spider legs unaccountably clinging to his upper lip. He is thirteen.

"I told you we had to leave by 7:05 at the very latest and it's 7:20 already!"

"Chill, Mom." He goes out the door and climbs into the Toyota. Ava and Aidan both fuss as she straps Ava into her car seat, Aidan into the infant SnugRide. 7:27. David will be late for school, Sarah late for work. Again. Aidan lets out a huge fart and, from the sudden awful smell, a load of wet shit. Ava goes, "Eewww!" David pops in his iPod ear buds, as if sound could obliterate odor. Aidan wails.

Sarah drives grimly, fingers clenched on the wheel. She drops David off at school—not even one other car still on the pick-up loop—and Ava at pre-school. Aidan cries the entire time. He is still crying when she hands him, as gingerly as an IED, to Mrs. Frick. The babysitter clicks her tongue at the smell, at the dampness, at Sarah's obvious bad parenting. Her look could wither a cactus. 8:09. By the time she gets to work, finds a parking spot, and runs to the elevator, the staff meeting has been in progress for thirty-five minutes.

"Sarah," says McAfee, "how nice of you to honor us with your presence."

The floater is cushioned, and she floats along the corridor on invisible mag-lev wings, Liam walking by her side. A few people glance curiously. This is a place of brisk, competent people, of uncarpeted corridors, of nameplates that are neither boastfully large nor self-effacingly small. Scientists, engineers, technicians. There are no old people here. She sees no one over ninety.

Liam's hand, laid protectively over hers, has two small brown dots near the thumb. Surely he isn't old enough for age spots? She can't remember what year he was born. But his twins are in school now, she remembers that.

"One more transfer, Gran," Liam says as he helps her off the floater and onto the Throne. That's what she immediately dubs it: a great padded chair royal with silver wires, ruby lights, data screens glinting like mirrors. How long ago was it that clothing had all those tiny mirrors sewn into it? She had a long red skirt, full, the mirrors at the hem flashing every time she moved.

This high-tech throne is a long way from the simple hominess of bread. Not that she had ever been one for that. Too often the sentimental cliché meant "simple" and "homey" for the husband and children, bought with exhaustive, unending effort by a wife trying to do it all. Although maybe it was different now.

"Ready, ma'am?" a tech asks.

She is ready.

Sarah makes her presentation at the morning's second meeting, knowing that she is not sufficiently prepared. It goes neither well nor badly; she was always good at winging it. But her mind is too much on the lunch-hour meeting across the street.

At 12:10, already late, she is dashing from the building when a young woman blocks her path. "Margaret Lambert?"

She is startled: by the use of her despised first name, by the expression on the young woman's face. It somehow seems both stern and compassionate. Sarah says, "Yeesssss. . ."

"You have been served," the girl says, and hands Sarah an envelope. Almost immediately she melts into the noon crowd.

Sarah opens it. Mack is suing her for divorce.

On the way to the marriage counselor. Where he agreed to meet her twelve minutes ago. He has had her served *on the way to the marriage counselor*.

Standing in the middle of the sidewalk, Sarah lets out a cry of sheer anguish, high and almost inhuman, the scream of a rabbit with steel teeth clamping closed on its leg. People stop, jerk around, stare.

Obvious, she starts to sob. The paper blurs. Sarah cannot stop sobbing.

He wants custody of the kids.

She is eased onto the Throne, which is surprisingly comfortable. But why shouldn't it be comfortable, considering what such "private usage" is costing her. The fee for her five minutes on the Throne will considerably reduce her grandchildren's inheritance. Liam doesn't mind, but not all of the others are so understanding. She knows that Amarinda thinks that Sarah should take advantage of the new euthanasia capsules, painless and instantaneous and so tiny, as if death were made less monumental by arriving through a dribble of liquid like a raindrop. Amarinda wants her inheritance before it is all spent on "frivolities" like this. The child was always greedy, always.

But it is her money. Once Samuel's, now hers.

The techs attach things to her: electrodes, implants, leeches, and maggots—she doesn't know what they are. It doesn't matter. What do these young men and women think of her skin, so dry and pitted and spotted that it might as well be the Martian surface where her son died?

"Are you ready, ma'am?" a young woman asks. Pretty, even with that bizarre haircut and the fashionable body staining. The staining looks like port-wine birth marks, which in her day people tried to cover with make-up or laser off. She remembers how young skin, stained or not, feels: her own once, her children's, Liam's, his children's. That baby smell at the back of the neck, like powder and dew.

"Ready," she says. They lower a small screen in front of her eyes, a screen no bigger than the envelope for a letter, when people still sent love letters through the mail.

Sarah can't stop wailing. She sounds like Aidan shrieking with a full diaper. Mack has just dumped a load of shit on her, and she stands on the sidewalk and sobs. Eventually a man—tentative, nervous, kind—puts a hand on her arm.

"Miss, are you all right?"

She is not all right. Her husband wants a divorce she did not see coming, her job is shaky, her kids might be taken away, she has had five hours sleep every night for months. There is no other way to get everything done, and even so she can't do it all. Mack, she realizes, is one of the things she didn't get around to. Not often enough, not with enough attention—give me another chance! Give us another chance!

"Miss, can I call you an ambulance? Are you in pain?"

She is in pain. Everything in her hurts. David, Ava, Aidan—she cannot lose them. She cannot. But Mack has the money, the stellar job, the jokey easy ways that David and Ava love: *Daddy! Daddy's home! I love you best, Daddy!* And although Sarah does not admit this to herself, not yet anyway, Mack also has the girlfriend willing to be the stay-at-home mom that Sarah cannot be. She doesn't know the girlfriend's name, doesn't officially know that she even exists, but in some way that transcends chronology, she knows about Denise.

There is always a Denise.

"Picture time as a loaf of bread," Dr. Martin Callister had said in his holo interview. She had watched the program three times, leaning forward in her powerchair, trying to ignore the pain that meds no longer quite masked. "If you slice bread directly across the loaf, then each thin slice corresponds to a section of time—say, Tuesday, March 4 at 9:30 A.M. On that slice is everything happening at that moment. The slice behind it is 9:29 A.M.

"But what if you slice the bread not straight across but on the diagonal? Then a slice might contain moments from March 4, from April two years earlier, from September two hundred years earlier."

"A pretty analogy," the interviewer said. She was a skinny, snide redhead, her tone

stained with forced amusement. "But time is not bread."

"No. But time is as real as bread, a physical entity subject to mathematics. And the equations say that everything is simultaneous. Where equations go, engineering eventually follows."

"So you've built a time machine."

Dr. Callister, a large mild man with gray eyes that reflected light, gazed at her. "No. No travel is involved. A user cannot affect anything that has happened, ever. All the Chrono does is show on a screen what is already there, was there, will always be there."

"And so you can see the future, too?"

"No."

"Why not, if it's included on your so-called 'diagonal slice of time'?"

"We don't know why not."

"A flaw in the science, then," the interviewer said triumphantly, as if she'd just won a contest.

"A flaw in the engineering, perhaps," Dr. Callister said.

"So why should tax payers fund this flawed contraption?"

Dr. Callister said mildly, "You're an ass."

Watching, she laughed aloud, a sharp hard sound, like she imagined meteors made striking the rocky surface of Mars.

The kind man on the sidewalk raises both hands, lets them fall helplessly, looks around. As if this were a signal, two women approach from opposite directions. Sarah puts her hands over her face. She is appalled at herself, embarrassed clear to her marrow, but she can't stop crying. Her life has just shattered open, and the tender insides, light-sensitive, burn under the terrible laser of her own gaze.

Machinery turns on. A low hum, a sudden warmth, although maybe she only imagines that. Still, the reason these five minutes are so expensive is the enormous energy required, so maybe the heat is real. The small screen in front of her eyes brightens.

"You do understand, Gran, that you can't change anything? Can't even communicate with anybody living or . . . you do understand?" Liam, in the robocar, his face furrowed with anxiety that she will be disappointed.

"I know, Liam." She does know. He does not, not anything really. He is too young. It is not his father that she wants to see.

On the screen, Sarah stands sobbing on a city sidewalk. How young she looks! Three strangers flutter ineffectively around her. After that day, she never saw them again. Never got to thank them for their humane, useless sympathy.

Sarah concentrates her will. This is why she has left off the meds today; they blunt her concentration. She wills her message—because she must try, she has known she would try since the moment she saw Dr. Callister's holo—across eighty years, toward the sobbing woman who has reached her emotional and physical limits and cannot go on.

If I knew then what I know now. . . . People say it all the time in the retirement home. Her friends, those few still alive, repeat it like a mantra. They mean: *I wouldn't have married Emily or I would have had RenewGen much earlier or I would have bought that stock at 130 or I would never have let Aidan go to Mars to die.* But that wasn't what she wanted to tell Sarah. That sort of advice would not have changed anything, because nothing can ever be changed. What happens to us was set in motion long before we were born, by fate or history or genetics or a loaf of bread.

But one's perceptions of what happens—maybe that can be changed. And she has a secret weapon.

It will be all right, she thinks at the screen, throwing everything that she is into

the thought. *In the end, it will be all right. He will not get the kids. You will come to know that he wasn't worth this unspeakable agony, that he did you a favor by leaving. In a few years you will meet Sam, all sweetness and money. There will be other sweetnesses, too, unexpected moments when happiness will suddenly bubble through you like all the fragrances of spring. You will survive the loss of Mack, and Sam's eventual death, and even Aidan's. It is all survivable, and you are strong enough to do it. Get off the damn sidewalk!*

She squeezes her eyes shut and tongues the capsule hidden in her cheek. Her tongue brings it forward and she bites hard. Death is the only thing stronger than pain. In a head-to-head contest, death always wins.

"Gran?" comes Liam's voice, from very far away.

Sarah finally lowers her hands from her face. The gesture hurts; everything on her hurts. The air has suddenly brightened into glittery shards, sharp enough to wound. Her own red blouse blinds her. Each blade of intensely green grass could slice bread. Strangers press too close to her.

"I said, do you want us to take you to the hospital?"

"No, no. . . . I . . . no." And then, "I must get off the sidewalk."

They let her. She lurches away, process papers in her hand. The envelope falls to the sidewalk. Sarah doesn't know where she's going.

Not to the marriage counselor. That much is damn sure.

She has stopped crying. She stumbles on, moving forward. There is no other way to go.

"Gran! Oh my God!"

"Is she *dead*?" a tech says, disbelief in his voice. "We never had . . . none of the beta tests. . . ."

She doesn't hear them. She is flowing out, through and in and yet not of, space and time. Then nothing, but not before her sudden clutch of fear gives way to a moment of bizarre, utterly calm peace. An unexpected gift.

It will be all right, someone says to her.

And it is. ○



SOUTH OF OZ

“(S)outh of Oz, and north of Shangri-La.”

—George R.R. Martin

If there is a place south of Oz,
my compass will find it.
If it is the true north,
that lies past Shangri-La,
I have sought that way
since childhood, fairytale needle
always spinning toward strangeness.

My father, whose life was built
on careful lies—of where he was born,
of what he had done in the war,
of how many women he had loved—
always wondered at the cardinal points
of my longings, declaring them
unreal, as if his make-believe
was more natural than my compass rose.

I am aligned to the magnetic field
of the human heart, his was always a gyro,
spinning rapidly to keep up with a world
rotating solely on his solipsistic lies.
There was never adventure for him,
no Shangri-La, no Oz, only a cold trail,
trackless plain, and a meal of salty regret.

—Jane Yolen



MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

Lavie Tidhar

Lavie Tidhar's newest story for us is set in the same milieu as his Bookman Histories trilogy of steampunk-influenced novels. He is the World Fantasy Award winner of *Osama* and his latest novels are *Martian Sands* (PS Publishing) and *The Violent Century* (Hodder and Staughton). Lavie lives in London where, he tells us, he tweets too much.

From the Lost Files of the Bookman Histories

The year is 1888 and in London the Lizard-Queen Victoria reigns supreme. Discovered by Amerigo Vespucci on a remote island in the Carib Sea, the Queen and her get, a race of intelligent alien lizards, have since taken over the British throne. The lizardine navy rules the seas and it is said that the sun never sets on the Lizardine Empire.

Meanwhile, in France, sentient machines joined by humans form the Quiet Council, maintaining French independence in opposition to the lizards across the English Channel.

Into this political powder-keg comes the young man known only as Orphan. An innocent poet last seen working at Payne's Bookshop on the Charing Cross Road, Orphan has recently lost his beloved, Lucy, in an audacious terrorist attack on the ceremony to launch a probe to the planet Mars. Determined against all odds to bring Lucy back from the dead, Orphan has struck a devilish bargain with a mysterious assassin: an entity known only as The Bookman. . . .

Sent to France to meet his contact, on the way to for what is for all intents and purposes a suicide mission to the Carib Sea, our young hero arrives on the continent, only to discover—

A murder in the cathedral!

One: Across the Channel

Orphan stood on the deck of the ferry *Charon* and watched the setting sun illuminate the tall, white cliffs of Dover as they slowly grew smaller in the distance. There was sea-salt in the air, and tar, and from below deck the smell of frying

sausages mixed with cleaning fluid and a hint of sick. It reminded him, unpleasantly, of Guy's Hospital.

To his left, standing nonchalantly with his back to him beside the railings, a young man was reading a newspaper. He had straight hair parted to the left, a neat moustache, and was dressed in a sober brown suit. Orphan, in the habit of travelers everywhere who find themselves temporarily without either reading material or current news, peeked discreetly at the paper over the man's shoulder. What he saw made him close his fingers into fists; a helpless gesture.

Explosion rocks Charing Cross Road!
By our special correspondent.

In the early hours of yesterday morning a subterranean explosion rocked the foundations of Charing Cross Road and its environs. The explosion sent shockwaves throughout the nearby neighborhoods, causing damage to property and health. Two people were mildly hurt when their barouche-landau fell into an opening in the ground, and several people were rushed into hospital with minor injuries. The explosion caused damage to roads and houses, and destroyed a bookshop, Payne's, in Cecil Court. Scotland Yard Inspector Irene Adler was on the spot immediately after the explosion, with a full team of constables and police automata. She and her team were seen by this reporter to dig through the ruins of Payne's, where the proprietor and his assistant are feared to be missing amidst the rubble. Inspector Adler was not available for comment. The cause of the explosion is unknown, though experts suggest it was caused by a build up of natural gas deep under the city—

The young man folded the paper with a definitive slap of pages, said, "What rot!" and turned, finding himself unexpectedly confronted by Orphan, who did not have time to move away. "I beg your pardon," the man said, looking startled.

Orphan put up his hands. "I should be the one to apologize," Orphan said, "I couldn't help but glance at the paper you were reading, and I'm afraid my curiosity got the better of my manners."

"Oh, that's quite all right," the young man said. "Here, take it." And he pushed the paper into Orphan's hand. "Were you interested in the article about the explosion?"

He had clear, intelligent eyes, that seemed to study Orphan with attention. "Curious," Orphan offered.

"Quite," his companion said, a small smile playing on his lips. "And, of course, complete and utter rubbish." He snorted, and said, "A build up of natural gas! I ask you, what so-called 'expert' came up with *that* opinion? More likely it was the reporter's own inane notion."

"Why?" Orphan said, finding himself warming up to his energetic companion. "What do you think caused it then?"

"Revolutionaries," the man said confidently. "Notice how the police were immediately on the scene? How one place, and one place only, was fully destroyed? I would wager that a group of anti-Caliban sympathizers, the Neuromantiks for instance—or any other such group of revolutionaries, really, there is no shortage of them these days—had inadvertently set their hidden cache of explosives alight. Notice, too, that the names of the shop's proprietor and his assistant are not mentioned in the paper—no doubt the police are keeping a close lid on their identities until they are able to nab them—if they are still alive, of course."

Orphan was uneasy at his companion's acute observations, but also impressed. "What do you do?" he asked curiously. "Are you yourself in the police force?" Even as

he spoke, though, the thought occurred to him that it was unlikely—a member of the police would not be traveling toward the uncertain ground that was France.

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort,” his companion said, then added, with some uncertainty, “I’m a writer.”

“Oh,” Orphan said, surprised and to an extent relieved. “What do you write?”

An embarrassed look grew on the man’s face, as if already predicting his companion’s reaction and dreading it. “Scientific romance,” he said, “speculative fiction, don’t you know. Though I’ve only had one novel published, recently.”

“But that’s great,” Orphan said, smiling, and his companion, smiling back at him with not-inconsiderable relief, extended his hand to Orphan and said, “Herbert Wells. Please, call me Herb.”

“Orphan,” Orphan said, and they shook hands warmly.

“It is getting rather chilly,” Herb commented. “Would you care to join me below for a cup of tea?”

“I’d like that,” Orphan said. He liked Herb almost immediately—he seemed an open, honest man—a refreshing change from those souls he had encountered in the web of deceit that he had been floundering in since that long-ago visit of his to Gilgamesh. He stuffed the newspaper into his pack and followed Herb down the stairs and into the *Charon’s* dining room.

They sat over cups of hot tea at a table by a window that overlooked the sea. Darkness had fallen, and the sea had become rougher, sending waves and flakes of white foam against the side of the ferry.

“Have you been to France before?” Orphan asked.

His companion shook his head. “My first time,” he said. “It should prove to be an interesting place. . . .” his voice faded and he contemplated his tea with unseeing eyes. “I do wonder what life under the Republic is like.”

Orphan nodded. He, too, had wondered that, ever since departing from the Bookman’s presence. He wondered, and he worried.

A tacit silence, therefore, fell between them. Though travel to France was not prohibited, neither was it encouraged. And any discussion of the merits of the French Republic over the Everlasting Empire could bring potential trouble.

“So what does bring you across the channel?” Orphan asked at last. “If you don’t mind me asking, at least.”

“Oh, no, absolutely,” Herb said, looking pleased at the question. “It’s quite all right. You see, I’ve been invited as a guest to a most curious event—I’m quite looking forward to it, actually!—taking place in Paris from tomorrow. It’s a literary convention—a kind of gathering of like-minded people, all of whom are, as it turns out, fans of the scientific romance!”

“That does sound interesting,” Orphan said. He tried to picture it in his mind. While working at Payne’s he had sold the occasional novel of scientific romance, such as Bulwer Lytton’s *The Coming Race* or Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, and though the buyers ranged across the social strata, they seemed almost to form a stratum composed entirely of themselves: earnest, serious men (for they were almost exclusively male) whose eyes seemed to light up at the mention of their favorite book or author, and who often carried on at some length regarding the merit of this or that imaginary device before parting with their meager cash.

The thought made him smile. “I would have liked to see that,” he said.

“Well, then, you should come along!” Herb said enthusiastically.

“I don’t think I can,” Orphan said. He thought again of his parting with the Bookman, and of the instructions he had received. There was a man he had to meet, at a certain place and at a certain time. “But, if you are willing, and seeing that we are going the same way, perhaps we could travel together.”

"Splendid!" Herb said, and he clapped Orphan enthusiastically on the back. He was quite young, the realization came to Orphan, and despite his self-assurance may have been glad—even relieved—to find a traveling companion in that foreign land that was their destination. "Do you know, I can tell you are a man of letters yourself. There is an aura about you, as of a man who's lived his life surrounded by books—a veritable book man, I should say."

Orphan felt his face grow cold.

"What is wrong?" Herb said in concern. "Did I say something to offend you?"

Orphan forced a smile. Outside the waves beat against the hull like the pounding of a fist against a closed door. "No," he said, "it's just . . . you reminded me of something I'd rather not be reminded of, for the moment."

"My apologies," Herb said, a little stiffly. It was not, after all, his fault, Orphan thought. He had meant, no doubt, to give a compliment, and instead was faced with alarm.

"I did write," Orphan said. "I had some aspirations as a poet, but I'm afraid they've rather faded now."

Herb nodded, and his eyes searched Orphan's face with that probing, intelligent gaze he had already recognized in the man. "I'm sorry, my friend," he said, and it seemed to Orphan that his companion could sense the deeper pain that lay behind his words.

"Forget it," Orphan said. He took a sip from his tea and grimaced. "It tastes like piss," he said. Herb laughed. "Too true," he said. "Shall we go see what else there is to do on this tub?"

"Let's," Orphan said, and the two rose from their seats and ambled away down the corridor.

There was not much to do aboard the *Charon*, and so it was with some relief for both when the ferry finally docked at Calais.

Anxiety, however, soon took hold of Orphan as he and Herb disembarked. Sitting behind a chipped wooden table, a half-finished dinner beside him in a box, was a French immigration officer in full regalia.

"Your passports, please," he said.

Herb was going first, and was about to hand the officer his passport when a man, dressed in a dark cape and holding a cane, pushed in front of him.

"Fix," he announced in a loud whisper. "Detective Fix. Scotland Yard."

"Ah, yes," the French officer said. "Detective Fix. Your passport?"

The caped man handed it over, looking impatiently at his watch.

"Yes, that is fine," the officer said at last. He pointed at Fix's passport photo and laughed. "Very good!" he said.

"Yes, yes," Fix said, snatching back his passport. "It was a stormy day and the photographer was a nincompoop. Did you receive my wire?"

"We did."

"Have they. . .?"

"Left on the eight o'clock train, I am afraid," the officer said. "We did not detain them."

"Fine," Fix said impatiently. "May I go? I have already lost valuable time."

"Of course," the officer said, tapping his nose conspiratorially. "Au revoir, Monsieur Fix."

The detective stormed off and the officer looked after him for a long moment. "Nincompoop," he muttered to himself at last, as if tasting the word. Then he turned back to the small queue that had formed.

"Your name?" he said. Herb was next.

"Herbert George Wells," Herb said.

"And your profession, monsieur?"

"I am a writer."

"Oh," the French officer said, and raised his eyebrows. "What do you write, monsieur?"

Herb blushed. "Scientific romance, that sort of thing," he mumbled, and Orphan, watching him, almost laughed despite his nervousness. But the French officer's face lit up at the words. "Roman scientifique?" he said. "But that is marvelous! *C'est bon!* You are going to *la convention du monde*?"

"Yes," Herb said, pleased and surprised. "You know of it?"

"Of course!" The officer reached under his desk and returned with a rather used-looking book. "See?"

Orphan craned his neck. It was a copy of Victor Hugo's classic (for even Orphan had read it as a child), *La Créature de la Lagune Noire*. "Here in France, we honor such writings," the officer said, and he rose, and shook Herb's hand. "Welcome, Mr. Wells. Welcome to France."

Herb, grinning, returned the handshake heartily, and left the officer with much mutual good will.

Then it was Orphan's turn.

Apprehension gnawed at him. He brought out the passport he had received and gave it to the officer, who examined it for a long moment in silence, all his previous bonhomie seemingly forgotten.

"Your name?" he said at last.

Orphan hesitated. "Chapman," he said at last. "Homer Chapman."

The name, like the passport, came from the heavy envelope that lay on the table he had sat at, on the Bookman's island. The envelope was now in his pack. He couldn't help but feel that the name was the Bookman's joke at his expense. Chapman. A man who sells chapbooks. Homer, like the Greek poet. It was as if the Bookman was reducing that greatest of poets to an itinerant salesman of ephemeral texts. There was a message in there, to Orphan: don't think you are important. Play your part, or else. . . .

He was shaken out of his memories. "And what brings you to France, Mr. Chapman?"

Was it his imagination, or was the officer looking at him with suspicion? Behind the man he could see Herb looking at him with an unreadable expression. Of course, he thought. I introduced myself as Orphan to him. That was stupid. Nervous, he said, "Just traveling. My aunt has recently died and left me some money, and a wish that I do what she never could, and travel on the continent. I am merely honoring her last request."

The officer nodded slowly. "The Grand Tour, eh? That's fine, Mr. Chapman. No need to be nervous." He smiled, exposing stained teeth, and, returning the passport to Orphan, said, "Enjoy your stay."

"Thank you," Orphan said, "I have no doubt I will."

He stepped past and joined Herb, who was waiting for him, and they left the glum arrival area and stepped out to the shore. To Orphan's relief Herb did not comment on his name.

The coast was dark, save for a few isolated gas lamps scattered around the mainly abandoned docks. The air smelled of seaweed and a short way away a solitary stand lit by embers offered up the aromas of frying garlic and the hiss of spattering fat. There was something else to the air, too, Orphan thought. A wildness, indefinable, intangible, that wrapped itself into the wind and now teased his senses. He looked sideways at his companion and could see the same reaction in his eyes.

Herb laughed and shook his head. "It is awfully strange," he said, and Orphan nod-

ded. He felt a tension ebb away from him that had been his companion for so long that he no longer noticed it. Only now, as it was slowly flowing away from his muscles and his mind, did he feel it. Freedom.

And then he wished Lucy was there to experience this new shore with him, and the tension returned and settled over him like a leech.

"Come!" Herb said. "We'll be late for the train to Paris if we dawdle here too long."

Orphan agreed, and they set off, following the gas-lamps away from the dock. There were very few travelers besides them. A couple passed, speaking quietly in French, then a heavy-set man draped entirely in heavy dark cloth. When they reached the station it turned out to be not much more than a wooden shack planted beside a single railway track. The place had an abandoned feel, and Herb, tugging a little nervously at his moustache, said, "It feels like a ghost town."

"I guess there is not much demand for a railway here," Orphan said. "Considering."

"Yes," Herb said. "But I do hope . . ." he fell silent, not finishing the sentence. Instead he peered into the darkness that lay beyond the tracks and consulted his pocket watch. "The train is late," he said.

"Just like home, then," Orphan said, and his companion laughed. "Indeed."

The detective, Fix, Orphan noticed, was already on the platform, and kept glancing at his watch with an irritated air. He caught Orphan looking at him and scowled, his small eyes filling with suspicion. Orphan turned his head and said to Herb, "I wonder who he's after."

The uncomfortable thought percolating inside him was that it was he himself that the detective was pursuing, but he quickly banished the idea from his mind as nonsensical.

"Look," Herb said, pointing. "The train's coming."

Cutting through the darkness, the lights of the oncoming train illuminated the platform.

"It has no driver!" Orphan said.

The driver's car was empty. It came to a stop beside the platform and the doors opened with a whoosh.

"They have Babbage engines running French trains," Herb said, and his eyes sparkled. "Amazing!"

Orphan took a dubious look at the empty driver's car. "Is it safe?" he said.

But Herb was already climbing on to the train and, after a moment's hesitation, Orphan joined him. They took seats by the window, and then the doors closed by themselves and the train pulled out of the station. The lights of Calais slowly disappeared in the distance.

Two: La Convention du Monde de Roman Scientifique

They arrived at the Gare du Nord in the midst of night. The great dome of the train station was a lattice-work of steel and glass, a giant cobweb spun over an intricate maze of tunnels and rail-tracks, lit up with hundreds of electric lights that were strewn high against the ceiling.

"Magnificent!" Herb said, and grinned with delight. Orphan, who was also impressed, said, "It looks like Charing Cross."

"Right," Herb said.

They disembarked. The detective, Fix, had already disappeared. Good riddance, Orphan thought. He turned to Herb. "I guess this is goodbye. Where are you staying in Paris?"

"The Hotel Victoria, I believe," Herb said. "That's where this convention's taking place—what is the matter?"

"Odd, odd," Orphan muttered. He felt confused, and a little worried. "That's my destination, too."

"Excellent!" Herb said, and, as they stepped out of the station with their meager possessions, added practically, "We can share a cab then."

I don't understand this, Orphan thought. He felt the way he had back home, haunted by the Bookman's unseen presence. Books, he thought. I am bound by walls of books.

"Yes," he said, a little ungraciously, "I suppose we can."

Outside, the streets were mostly empty but for several barouche-landaus that stood waiting in a row and were quickly claimed by hurried passengers. They were long, sleek vehicles, with black unadorned chimneys and a single driver-cum-stoker at the front.

"Hôtel de Victoria," Herb announced to their driver, and settled in the cozy interior of the cab, while Orphan clambered after him and sat opposite. The seats were burgundy, worn yet comfortable, and the windows were large and clean, allowing the two passengers to easily look out onto the sleeping city. "*Rue de la Bûcherie*."

The car purred and moved away from the station, making its way through the narrow streets of Paris.

Orphan felt tired, and still uneasy. Why there? he thought. And who am I meant to meet? Almost, it had seemed to him that it might be Herb himself who was to be his contact, and that the young man was only toying with him by meeting him in that way on board the *Charon*. But no, he thought. He couldn't picture the cheery young man as the mysterious figure that was the Bookman's agent in Paris. Perhaps . . .

But he didn't complete the thought for, at that moment, with the Seine on their right, they could see the great cathedral of Notre Dame rising from its half-island; and the thought of that strange and disturbing edifice, of what it symbolized, made Orphan turn and watch it with horrified fascination.

"I never thought . . ." Herb said, his face, like Orphan's, glued to the window.

The cathedral rose out of the Île de la Cité like a giant, alien egg frozen in the process of hatching. It was made of the greenish, outlandish material that was brought from Caliban's Island by Les Lézards, the same glowing metal that, back home, formed the Queen's Palace. If the Gare du Nord was a testimony to human ingenuity and materials, clean-lined and well-lit, then the cathedral was its opposite: an eerie glow surrounded it, and above, surrounding the rim of its open roof, strange and disturbing gargoyles glared at the city below, their lizardine bodies frozen in the midst of indescribable actions.

Notre Dame, Orphan thought with a shudder, was impossible to ignore. And as he thought that the barouche-landau stopped, almost directly opposite the island, and announced, through the speaking horn fixed into the wall of the carriage—"*Rue de la Bûcherie*."

They disembarked and paid the driver. Orphan took one more look at the cathedral and turned away. In front of them was the Victoria Hotel. It was a modest, four-story building, set amidst a multitude of brasseries, in a cobbled street just off the main thoroughfare that ran parallel to the Seine. They walked up the short steps to the doors and entered the building.

The reception hall was wide and spacious. A fire was burning in the hearth at one end, and a group of men stood around it with drinks in their hands, talking in French. The reception consisted of a long wooden counter, a large register-book, and a sleepy clerk who took down their names and assigned them keys without comment. Above their heads, in bold, rather Gothic letters, a banner proclaimed this to be the setting for *Convention du Monde du Roman Scientifique*.

Orphan, suddenly thinking of nothing but a bed to call his own, parted from Herb with a "Goodnight, and sleep well," and ascended the stairs to his room, which turned out to be small, yet comfortable, with a window overlooking Notre Dame (he closed the blinds) and a single bed on to which Orphan fell as soon as he had taken off his shoes. He subsided almost immediately into a deep and dreamless sleep.

When he woke up the room was hot and Orphan was hungry. He left the room and made his way downstairs, locating the dining room by the smell of freshly baked bread wafting through the air.

The dining room was nearly empty and so Orphan sat on his own by the window with a cup of hot chocolate, a croissant, butter and jam. He chewed on the pastry in a desultory fashion—he was worried of events about to unfold, of the man he had to meet, and of the journey he was expected to take. He wanted to be back home, poring over innocent books of poetry, not going off to a forbidden island, to fight against a presumed threat that wasn't his concern. His attention, however, soon wandered, as a boisterous trio of young people entered the dining room and loudly called for the waiter. They took a long table near to him, directly in his line of sight, and it was only natural, then, that he began, almost against his will, to listen to their conversation. To his surprise, each of the men had a name-tag pinned to his breast pocket.

Members of this convention, Orphan thought. And, on listening to their conversation—of course. They are writers. He smiled to himself.

"I've read your latest story in *Terrible Tales*," said one, a young, barely sixteen, boy with quick, nervous movements—he had almost knocked away his coffee as he spoke—"and I thought it was *marvelous*, Arthur."

"Oh, Al, that small thing?" said the man he had addressed, a man not much older than twenty-five. He had a Welsh accent. "I hardly thought anyone would buy it off me, it was such a trifle." He beamed at the table, obviously pleased.

"Modesty doesn't suit you, Arthur," said another, of roughly the same age. "I've seen the review in this month's *Diabolique*, and they went so far as to call you—what was it—" he consulted a large magazine which Orphan examined with interest, the cover garish with a painting of a bug-eyed monster (it reminded him with a shiver of the Bookman) chasing a young maiden—"Ah, yes." He cleared his throat theatrically. "Arthur Machen is a rising new star in the field of weird literature. His short fiction is startlingly original, the horror palpable, the speculative element always thought-provoking. It is to be hoped there will be many more stories from the pen of this talented young writer."

Arthur grinned and the younger boy, Al (his name tag identified him, in nearly illegible handwriting, as A. Blackwood) looked up at him admiringly.

"Well, Montague," Arthur said, "Unlike you, I am not nominated for any awards this year, so there!"

"So there, what?" said the man (whose name tag said, in rather precise, clear handwriting, M.R. James), "You're bound to be up next year with that novella you had in *Cosmic Tales of Adventure*, the one about the squids in space. It was most effective."

"Oh, do stop it, Montague," Arthur said. "It was pure hack work, and you know it. I mean, squid in space—honestly!"

"I thought it was great!" the younger man (boy, really)—Al—said.

"Perhaps," murmured Montague, "you should have written about lizards in s . . ."

He was silenced by a look from Arthur, whose smile had evaporated. "There's a difference between truth and fiction," he whispered, quite loudly. "Please do not mention your speculations here."

"This is France, not home," Montague pointed out calmly.

"Nevertheless," Arthur said, shaking his head. "Nevertheless."

The three fell silent and attacked their breakfast instead. Orphan did not recognize any of their names, but they were obviously writers, and of that—what had the reviewer called it?—*weird fiction*. Orphan, who was drawn mainly to poetry books, was not aware of the apparent proliferation of specialist publications dedicated to the genre. *Diabolique? Terrible Tales?* He sighed. They sounded unpleasant.

“Orphan!” he heard a voice cry and, lifting his head, saw Herb come bouncing into the room, a brand-new name tag pinned to his suit. “You’re only just up? Did you sleep well? I’ll join you for coffee,” he said and was about to sit down opposite Orphan when the three men noticed him and the youngest, Al, called out, “Herb? Herbie Wells?”

Orphan smiled to himself as Herb remained standing and said, “Yes?” in the kind of way that authors do when they suspect they are being recognized, but are not sure if they are in for a compliment or a lecture as to the lack of merit in their work.

“I’m Al. Algernon Blackwood? We exchanged letters some time back?”

“Oh, *Algernon*,” Herb said. “Of course. You wrote to me regarding *The Chronic Argonauts*.”

The boy blushed with pleasure at being remembered. “I thought your idea was so original! No one has written that before!” He turned to his companions and said, “This is Herbert George Wells.”

“Wells, Wells,” Montague murmured. “The book about the time machine, right?”

“Good stuff!” Arthur said, “Wells! Come and join us!”

Herb stood hovering uncertainly between Orphan and his new friends, looking a little like a moth caught between gas lamps. Seeing it, Orphan smiled again, and Arthur Machen, his eyes twinkling, said, “Bring your friend over, too.”

Herb looked to Orphan, who nodded and stood up, and the two of them went to join the table of writers.

“So who else is here from across the channel?” Herb said once they were seated. “I’ve not even had a proper look at the program yet.”

“Let me see,” Montague said, “on the professionals’ side there’s yourself, Arthur, myself—though really, I am more of an academic, you know—our young friend Algernon here . . . who else? Stevenson is *tentatively* scheduled to be here—he is doing a book tour on the continent at the moment for *The Black Arrow*, have you read it?—and I think I saw George Chesney about—he’s only been invited because of that *Battle of Dorking* of his, you know.”

“I loved *The Battle of Dorking* when I was growing up,” Herb said. “If I knew he was coming I’d have brought a copy for him to sign.”

Arthur Machen chuckled and said, “There’ll be plenty of time for that, Wells. We’re all scheduled for a group signing at some point, and the dealers’ room is set on the second floor. You should be able to pick up any book you like in *there*. Have you seen it yet?”

“No. . . .” Herb said, and his eyes seemed to glaze with an inner vision of the place.

“Well, I hope Stevenson makes it,” Al said. “I brought my first edition of *Treasure Island* with me, and also *The Black Arrow*, which I thought was excellent.”

“A curious book,” Montague said. “What does he call it—a *novel of alternative-history*? An interesting idea.”

“This is what I love about our field,” Al said enthusiastically. Orphan found himself warming to the young man, who seemed to embrace everything with the same bright-eyed passion. “It keeps coming up with these fascinating new ideas. Like Wells’ time machine. And that thing Stevenson does with *The Black Arrow*—this alternative-history idea, where he made one change in historical events and extrapolated its effects from there—no wonder he was given a *Grand Maître* award last year.”

“I don’t know,” Arthur said, a little huffily. “I don’t really see the attraction. If you want to write a historical novel, by all means write a historical novel. And if you

want to write a speculative novel, do that. But to mix the two? History is history. It can't be changed, so why contemplate it?"

Orphan, who suddenly thought about the Mechanical Turk, found himself wondering if history really was as unchangeable as Arthur declared. Perhaps, he thought, Stevenson is just describing another world, and that world exists in a place just as real as ours? And then he smiled, and thought, I'm beginning to think like one of *them*.

"You're up for an award yourself, aren't you, Wells?" Al said.

Herb blushed. Orphan, who had been observing the conversation for some time and noticed how obsessed with awards these writers obviously were, felt amusement suffuse him again. "What are you up for?" he asked.

"Best Novel," Al said helpfully. "For *The Chronic Argonauts*."

"It's obviously flattering to be nominated," Herb said. "But, you know, I'm not sure my treatment of the theme is really quite good enough in this novel. I might try it again, later, in a new book. I don't know what I'd call it, though. . . ."

"How about *The Time Machine*?" Orphan said.

"Yes, maybe," Herb said thoughtfully, and chewed on a croissant.

At that moment silence fell. All heads turned to the doorway, and Orphan's with them. A hushed expectancy lay on the table, and Al emitted a gasp of awe and, pointing, whispered, "It's Hoffman!"

In the doorway stood a . . .

Not a man, Orphan thought. Though he looked like one. He was tall, with a mass of black hair and an unshaven face, large eyes over a large nose, and thin lips that all combined to give him an unexpected air of gentleness. He moved with a halting gait—like Byron, Orphan thought. That was what the man reminded him of—of the Byron automaton.

The figure surveyed the room slowly, the head moving—mechanically, Orphan thought—as the body lumbered forward, toward their table. His companions were enraptured, and even Herb looked awe-struck, looking up at the hulking figure with admiration in his eyes.

"Mr. Hoffman!"

"Mr. Hoffman!"

They all rose, and Orphan, not wishing to be left out, rose too. The gathered writers all began to offer the automaton their seats and, when he refused with a small smile and a shake of his head, to bring a new chair for their guest.

In the event, the automaton sat down, in that same slow, jerky motion, in a chair that was inserted between Orphan and Herb. This close, he had a curious smell about him, a not-unpleasant fragrance of coconut oil and aged rubber.

"Hello, my friends," he said. "It is a pleasure to see so many practitioners of our noble field all gathered in one place, together."

He spoke in a heavy German accent yet had a deep, sonorous voice, though it, too, a little like the voice of the Turk, held within it tiny, almost imperceptible scratches and echoes, as if it were a recording made some time before.

The effect of his words on the assembled writers was remarkable, and they each grinned, or blushed, or simply looked awed in their turn. "I hope I have not disturbed you?"

"Oh, no!"

"Far from it!"

"An honor, sir, an honor!"

And Al, reaching into his bag by his feet, returned with an autograph book and, with a nervous, shy gesture pushed it toward the automaton and said, "Would you mind . . . ?"

Hoffman smiled. "I'll be delighted," he said.

"To Algernon," Al said. "Algernon Blackwood. If you wouldn't mind, sir."

"Not at all," Hoffman said, and his hand reached for the book and the proffered pen and wrote, with slow movements and meticulous care, the dedication and his autograph: E.T.A. Hoffman.

Then, to Orphan's surprise, Hoffman turned to him. The eyes, he saw, like Byron's, seemed more like marbles than human eyes, yet they also seemed to examine him closely. "You, sir, are not a part of this gathering. Am I correct?"

Orphan, feeling uneasy—he had quite enjoyed the fact hardly any attention had been paid to him so far, and much preferred it—said, "I am merely passing through."

The automaton nodded. "Don't we all," he said cryptically. He had moved closer, his face almost touching Orphan's. The smell of rubber and oil, this close, was almost overpowering. "You have the look about you of a man who knows some secrets," he said, and there was a strange tilt to his voice, almost a leer. "Are they worth knowing, my friend?"

He could tell the others were watching. Beyond the automaton Herb was twitching, uncomfortable.

"They seldom are," he managed to say. The smell really *was* overpowering.

Hoffman laughed. "Do you play chess?" he said.

Orphan did not like where this was leading. "Occasionally," he said. "Why?"

Hoffman turned his head stiffly away, in a gesture that made it clear to the others he wanted some space. Chairs scraped hurriedly. The automaton turned back to Orphan.

"I believe we have a mutual friend," he said softly. "Tell me, have you seen the cathedral yet?"

"Notre Dame? No."

"I recommend you visit it," Hoffman murmured. "Exquisite architecture. Say, past noon today?"

He must be my contact, Orphan thought. But . . . this? He did not associate the Bookman with machines of Hoffman's type. Too primitive, he thought. The Bookman is a master of simulacra, not a simple artisan. But—the chess. Perhaps, he thought, he is an agent of the Turk. What did he want? Did they somehow learn of his journey? He had thought he had left that entire web of conspiracy back home, on the other side of the channel.

He said, into the lengthening silence, "I might take a look at it."

"Oh, you should, you should," Hoffman said, turning away from him, his voice suddenly jovial. "Well, lads, I believe the opening ceremony is about to commence. Shall we adjourn to the hall?"

Giving Orphan lingering, distrustful looks, the others rose from their chairs. Orphan glanced at Herb and they exchanged a long look. Herb's face was full of curiosity. Later, Orphan's look said; though he didn't know if he could ever confide in his friend about those matters. He did not want to endanger him.

"To the hall!" cried Arthur Machen and, "To the hall!" cried M.R. James, and the group of them, leaving behind a jumble of plates and cups, traipsed after the slow-moving automaton of E.T.A Hoffman and out of the doors of the dining-room, Orphan trailing in their wake, full of disturbed and unwanted thoughts.

Three: A Curious Gathering

The hall, it turned out, was a medium-sized room on the second floor of the Victoria: a small podium stood at the opposite end to the door, and before it were chairs arranged in untidy rows. The room was filling up leisurely by the convention's dele-

gates: mainly young and middle-aged men, with a smaller assortment of women. Clothes, on the whole, while generally of good quality, seemed to sit ill-at-ease on the assembled guests, as if, despite some half-hearted attempt, they had finally ended up wearing the first thing that came from their suitcase in the morning. Not shabby, exactly, but, Orphan thought, rather like a collection of somewhat eccentric book-lovers on a day's stroll through Charing Cross Road.

After some minutes the room was almost full, and a silence descended on the audience, going through the rows, until the entire room was finally quiet.

A lively, rather portly man came on the podium. He wore a thick beard, grey turning to black above his mouth, and his eyes sparkled as he slowly surveyed the audience.

"Mesdames et messieurs!" he said, spreading his arms wide, "Ladies and gentlemen! *Bienvenue!* Welcome!"

He then bowed. The crowd burst into energetic applause.

"For the benefit of our foreign guests," the man said as they quieted down, "I shall speak in English. As hosts and world leaders in this field of ours, it is only natural for us to be thus graceful. It is also, I must confess, a language I do appreciate, if only because many of my characters use it—"

There was scattered applause, and much laughter—"and so, my friends, I wish to welcome you once more, to the world convention of scientific romance and weird fiction!"

The applause threatened to cave in the roof. The man on the podium beamed at the audience. "I," he said, "am Jules Verne."

A respectful silence greeted his words. Beside Orphan Herb fidgeted, a beaming smile on his face. "This is so exciting!" he whispered loudly to Orphan, who nodded back, a little bemused.

"When I was growing up in Nantes," Verne said, his deep voice echoing easily around the room, "I used to walk, for miles at a time, around and around the city streets, my hands behind my back, my head staring without seeing at the pavement. I was day-dreaming, you see. Making up exciting stories for myself, stories I could not find in the publications my parents brought home. I made up stories about great adventures, quests and perils, pirates and wizards, of flying through the air and going deep into the bottom of the sea!"

The audience listened on. Herb's face had the expression of a man at worship.

"I used to dream of being a writer. Of putting these fantasies of mine into books. I had no one to talk to of my dreams. No fellow enthusiasts for such—such nonsense." He paused and seemed to look far away. "So much has changed," he said, more softly. "Our world is at a great upheaval, a maelstrom of great change. Every day a new invention becomes known to the public. Every day great minds are at work on expanding our scientific knowledge, of bettering the fate of men—and women, too, of course—" here he inclined his head at two young ladies at the front of the audience, who looked up at him admiringly, "We are riding a great wave of change, my friends. And you, all of you, who I so wish I could have known when I was growing up, when I fancied myself alone—you are all riding at the very front of that wave!"

More cheers, and Herb was clapping like mad beside Orphan.

"It makes my heart glad to see you all here, today. In a few short years we have gone from being a small, ignored minority of enthusiasts, to a true new nation. Never before has the world seen such a gathering of minds. Writers who each day rise from their bed and look ahead, at the future, as it inches up on all of us, one second at a time. Looking ahead, higher than ever, we envision the future, we write down what we see. Nothing is impossible! *Rien n'est impossible!*"

"So right," Herb murmured beside Orphan. "So true!"

Orphan patted him reassuringly on the shoulder.

"My friends, we have some of the greatest writers of the romance of science here with us. Writers who envision not only science's great benefits, but also its possible faults. Whose questing minds hunger for knowledge, but whose hearts know its perils, too! We have delegates from Germany, from England, and of course, from France! From the four corners of the globe people have come, some from as far afield as Vespuccia and Zululand!"

More claps.

"Our guest of honor this year," Verne continued, "is the remarkable Alexandre Dumas, fils."

Claps. Verne motioned with his hand to another portly gentleman roughly his own age, who sat in the first row. "The son of the great Dumas père, the author of those classics of our genre—need I remind anyone here of *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*? That eternal tale—banned everywhere in the so-called Everlasting Empire—of the man in the iron mask, of his imprisonment, his escape, his rise as a man of scientific genius, bent on exacting his revenge on the race of bug-eyed monsters who had taken over the land? Not only is it a savage political satire, a thrilling adventure, and a thoughtful and rigorous examination of the consequences of scientific research—it is also, to put it simply, a masterpiece."

"Hear, hear!" Orphan heard Arthur cry, two seats along.

"Who can forget his tales of D'Artagnan and his friends, fearless, honorable warriors in the series of *The Space Musketeers*? Or his portrayal of a Paris ravaged by an invasion in *Les Mohicans de Paris*? The man was a master of the craft, and his son—" here his voice changed yet again, became warm and intimate—"Alexandre, is an accomplished writer in his own right, who, having been loath to see his father's work copied and imitated, had several years ago began adding to the Dumas canon, expanding on the adventures of D'Artagnan and his friends, based on the extensive notes his father had left behind. There are over nine books in that series now, written by Alexandre and his collaborator, the extravagant and valiant—and a remarkable writer in his own right—Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—" here a man sitting beside Dumas fils rose slightly and gave a small, sardonic bow—"author of *L'Ève Future* and many more unique tales of roman scientifique, and all of them marvelous."

Herb shrugged, though the audience clapped more enthusiastically than ever. Orphan's look questioned Herb, but his friend shook his head. Orphan made a note to ask him about it later.

"But we have more esteemed guests," Verne continued, unheeding of the silence. "From Germany—though now a naturalized French citizen—" he looked over the audience and added, as if in parenthesis, "for we of the Republic value all intelligent life, and do not discriminate," which caused Herb amusement but made Machen ball his hands into fists, "E.T.A. Hoffman, or rather, his simulacrum. A good friend of mine, and the true embodiment of a wonderful writer." He smiled serenely at the audience and said, "As we are such fast friends, I tend to call him E.T. or sometimes, when we are alone—" he grinned at the audience—"The Hoff. Please give him a warm welcome!"

Everyone clapped and Orphan joined in, if less than wholeheartedly. He was disturbed by the automaton.

"From Germany, also," Verne continued, "we have the energetic and valiant writer of countless adventures, the man whose name is synonymous with courage and heroism, the man known all over the world but most of all amidst the tribes of Vespuccia, where he is known as *Old Shatterhand*—we are indeed honored to have with us today Karl May!"

The German author, a tall, lithe man in the second row, stood and bowed gracefully to the audience.

"And—born in Italy, a man both of this continent yet equally of the world, a prolific and prodigious writer of haunting mystery—F. Marion Crawford!"

More claps, and the man sitting beside Karl May stood and gave a quick bow, accompanied by a beaming smile.

"Friends," Jules Verne said, his voice caressing his audience, "I am delighted to have you all here today. I have talked enough. Let the convention begin!"

And the ceremony was over with a roar of clapping and hoots. A short, balding man then came on the stage, thanked everyone again for coming, and reminded the assembled guests that the group signing and award ceremony would take place in the hall at five o'clock.

"A signing," Herb said wistfully as they got up and began moving out of the door. "I wonder what I should write, if people ask me for a personal dedication. I never know what to say. Best wishes is so . . . pedestrian."

"Perhaps you should come up with a stock phrase for the book?" Orphan suggested. "Like, say . . ." he thought about it. "Time flies?"

"To X," Herb murmured. "Time flies! Best, H.G. Wells. Hmmm. It's not too bad, I guess."

"The future is already here," suggested Machen beside them.

"No time like the present!" Montague said on the other side.

"I'll think of something," Herb said, and sighed.

As they walked down the stairs Orphan remembered a question. "What was that about Alexandre Dumas fils and the other guy?"

"Isle-Adam," Herb said, and shrugged. "He does what we in the business—" he inflated his chest a little, seeming proud of himself—"call the *sequel trade*."

"Excuse me?"

"He deals in sequels. Continuations. Follow-ons. You see," Herb said, warming to his subject, "Dumas—Dumas père—was a master. A great writer. And he created a great universe in the world of the Musketeers. Who can forget D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis? Who can forget that great villain, Richelieu, the Emperor of Mars? Who can forget the hauntingly beautiful Milady, the spy and agent of the Star Kings?"

"I don't understand," Orphan admitted. "If it was such a great world, what's wrong with Dumas fils and his collaborator extending it?"

"Oh, nothing!" Herb said; though Orphan thought he said it rather dismissively. "It pays one's bills."

"I see," Orphan said, who didn't.

Downstairs, in the area around the hotel reception, stands had been set up, laden with books, magazines, and colorful bric-a-brac.

"Monsieur Wells?"

"Yes, that's right," Herb said. He had been approached by a thin, youngish man with a burning cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Alain Nevant," said the man, and put his hand forward to shake Herb's.

"Monsieur Nevant!" Herb said, beaming. "Of Bragelonne?"

It must be his publisher, Orphan thought, and was proven right when Nevant said, "*Oui*," also smiling, then added, "It was an honor to publish your novel. Would you like to see it?" and here he pointed to a table by the entrance that was bursting with piles of books. "Perhaps you could sign some for us now? I expect they will sell very well during the convention."

"I'd be delighted!" Herb said, and momentarily he and Nevant were gone, leaving Orphan standing by the door. It was past noon, he saw.

He stepped outside, feeling the Parisian sun beat on his face. The hubbub of the convention disappeared behind him and was replaced with the bustle of the Latin Quarter. On the road running parallel to the Seine carts, cabs and barouche-landaus were passing, their drivers gesticulating at each other, the horses pausing every so often to empty their bowels on to the ground, the barouche-landaus belching smoke into the already fragrant air. From everywhere came the smells of cooking foods, of frying garlic and simmering sauces, and of meats roasting on open fires. Tables were laid all around, covered in cloth and bottles of wine, and the burghers of Paris sat at them, talking, eating, smoking, and reading.

He began wandering through the narrow, cobbled alleyways, listening to the talk of people going past, letting the smells of the cooking permeate his senses—cities, he realized, *smelled* different, and this was the Parisian scent—busy, loud, aromatic and humid, a little like home but at the same time indescribably different.

I like it, he thought. There is a warmth about this city, a gentle busyness that spells prosperity. He went past stalls selling foods, drinks, used books lying in drowsy heaps on the pavement, clothes, cloths, spices, fish, coffees and teas, vegetables and fruits, and felt hungry again. It's hard not to, he thought, in Paris. The thought made him smile.

He stopped at a stand selling grilled chickens and bought half of one, to which he added a freshly baked baguette from a nearby stall and a thick slab of Brie from another, two oranges from slightly further along, and finally a small bottle of strong, red wine, and carried his newly purchased lunch along with him until he found himself at a small, green garden that stood a little way away from the hotel, overlooking the Seine and the cathedral rising above it.

He sat down at a vacant bench and began to eat, feeling ravenous. He tore the meat of the chicken with his fingers and soaked up the grease with the bread, which was crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside, and still hot from the oven. He cut large chunks of the chicken with a pocket knife and laid it on the bread, and washed it all down with the help of the wine.

A little way away, on another bench, he spotted two young men—really no more than boys—talking animatedly to each other. They bore, he noticed, name tags from the convention. One was named Hanns Heinz Ewers; the other was Gaston Leroux. They were communicating, rather loudly, in an English accented in German and French, respectively.

"I *loved* the latest issue," Ewers said. "The Fantôme is a wonderful creation. And the drawings! So vibrant!"

"We have very good artists," Leroux said, looking pleased. "I am so glad to meet a fellow fan of *bande dessinée*, of—what do the English call it—a graphic novel?"

"Graphic novel, ja," Ewers said. "But everyone knows no one can compete with the French when it comes to the art of graphic narrative."

"Really," Leroux said, grinning widely, "you are too kind, my friend."

"I have been thinking of writing my own graphic novel," Ewers confessed. They were both eating pomegranates and the pips spilled down on the floor like bright patches of blood. "I have an idea for a story about a woman automaton who commits murders."

"I liked your story in—what was it—*Diabolique*? You have a devious mind, Hanns."

"Thank you," Ewers said, looking pleased. "Nevertheless . . . I wish it was me who came up with your idea of the phantom. Such a concept! A masked vigilante, hiding underneath the opera house, from which he comes out in the dead of night to fight crime! I do believe I am right in saying you may well have created a template for graphic novels for years to come."

"You're too kind," Leroux said again. "Look, I will have a word with the publisher.

We can always use new blood on the writing team. There are plans to syndicate the phantom into all of Europe, and Vespuccia too."

"That'd be fantastic," Ewers said, and the two of them, hands stained red, rose from the bench and sauntered away toward the island, soon disappearing from view.

Orphan smiled to himself. When he was finished, and feeling quite drowsy, he peeled an orange and ate the slices slowly as he contemplated the view.

Notre Dame rose out of the Seine like a monstrosity, a mocking inversion of the grandeur of Les Lézards's Palace: it was made of the same strange, greenish metal, and in the brightness of the day it seemed to suck in the sunlight, casting awkward shadows where no shadows should have been. People milled on the island around the cathedral, but they had a different look to the crowds that busily moved on the left bank: these moved with jerky, unnatural motions, like bad imitations of the way an automaton might move, and their faces were vacant and hollow, like the patients of an asylum. Even from a distance their faces disturbed Orphan: he did not want to approach the cathedral, did not want to encounter what he knew sat at its heart, that strange, mysterious cult that he had heard whispered about, but which, back home, the Queen and her coterie never deigned to comment on.

For in the heart of this free, enlightened Republic, in the midst of its great capital city, there rose a strange and inexplicable religion: one for whom the rulers of the Everlasting Empire, the majestic *Les Lézards*, were seen as nothing else but gods.

Four: A Death in the Cathedral

Having finished his food, Orphan disposed of it in a nearby litter-bin and walked slowly across the road and over the river, finding himself at last on *Ile de la Cité*. It was cold in the large square fronting Notre Dame, and he found that his attention was constantly being dragged toward the overbearing building, as if its architects had designed it as a kind of school-yard bully, on whom it was best to always keep a wary eye.

The thin crowd around him was, to an extent, composed of tourists, who were recognizable by the same nervous, somewhat excited glances they kept throwing around. The majority, however, were of the people he had, until then, only heard of but never seen: the *Punks de Léopard*.

They were an odd, mixed crowd, the punks: their hair was cut off entirely for both the males and the females, save for several who had a curious ridge or spine made of a narrow strip of hair in the middle of their scalp, that stood in tall spikes from their otherwise-bare heads. Their naked skulls were painted, most commonly, in a greenish-brown imitation of *Les Lézards*' skin, and were often patterned with bands of alternating color, while those with spiked hair had it painted in outlandish, unnatural dyes that seemed to glow in response to the unhealthy light of the cathedral. Their faces, too, were painted to resemble those of lizards, and their clothes were sparse and made entirely of leather, which was painted on to resemble scales. They walked around in small groups, and when one opened his mouth to speak, Orphan saw he had had his tongue cut so that it, too, resembled a lizard's.

The tourists loved them. Old French men had set up camera stands at all corners of the square and were making a profitable trade—as were the punks themselves, who charged the tourists to have their picture taken with them. At another corner he passed a group of punks in war paint who were hissing in a choir, making a strange, ethereal sound that sent a shiver down Orphan's back: they seemed to him at that moment to be more alien than *Les Lézards* themselves, a new and unknown species that

had little humanity in it and that reveled in its own, makeshift difference.

The punks had built the cathedral on the ruins of the old Notre Dame. As they were, after all, free citizens of the Republic, nobody stopped them. Who had sponsored that construction, and why, Orphan didn't know. It simply sat there, squatting like a hideous toad on the *Ile de la Cité*, and the punks came there to worship, and the tourists came there to gawk.

And, now, Orphan had come to meet at last with his contact.

He stepped through the open doors of Notre Dame into the dark and humid interior. Pools of fetid water filled the giant hall, and in the warm, stagnant air flies buzzed lazily, landing here and there on thin reeds and—despite his wild flailings—on Orphan himself.

He made his way through narrow strips of grassy land toward the center of the hall. It reminded him suddenly of the Bookman's lair underneath Payne's, in the similarity but also in the contrast, for the Bookman's place was cold and clinical and clean, and its water dead and filled with inanimate corpses, while this place was alive with the buzzing of flies and the thousands of small lizards scuttling through the shrubbery and climbing the green, luminescent walls.

There were few people inside the cathedral. An altar was set up at its heart and Orphan approached it slowly, with cautious steps, until he found himself before it: it was a makeshift island, made of the same strange metal of the walls, and beside it was a bench, surprising in its ordinariness, a plain wooden bench for visitors, which was currently occupied by one person.

The Hoffman automaton.

He sat down beside Hoffman and waited. He did not look directly at the automaton.

The silence between them lengthened. Finally, he looked sideways at the simulacrum. Nerves made him wet his lips. He began to say, "I am here," when he became aware of the absolute stillness of the figure beside him and, more than that, of something deeply, profoundly wrong with it. He reached out a hand to shake Hoffman's shoulder; and the body, at the touch of his hand, slowly toppled down to the ground.

There was a hole at its back, and through it springs and gears, a whole miniaturized, complex clock-work stared at him with broken edges and he thought, numbly, Not again. Please.

He looked at the body, and then coiled back, feeling sick. He heard a crunching sound and raised his foot, too late. On the ground were Hoffman's eyes, staring up at him in a silent accusation, and he had just crushed one of them beneath his shoe.

A shout rose in the damp air. He couldn't tell where it originated. He saw dark-clothed figures moving toward him from several sides, making their way through the many paths that criss-crossed the pools.

Then a hand grabbed him roughly by the elbow and a voice, smoky and rough and close to his ear, said, "You bloody fool. You utter, bloody fool."

A shot echoed in the air. The man who had grabbed him was long and tall and willowy, dressed in loud, summery clothes: he looked like a wealthy tourist but for the large Colt in his hand.

"Could you not wait?" he said to him, almost hissing. "Your instructions were clear enough, I should think. Now look at the mess you're in."

He waved the gun at the approaching figures and shouted, "Stay back!"

One of the figures threw something at them, and a cloud of smoke erupted around them. The man beside Orphan said, "Damn," and dragged him away. In moments they were racing over the path toward the exit, with the black-clothed figures in close pursuit.

The man shot back at them, twice. One of the figures fell, rolled, and hit one of the

pools with a splash. The others continued to follow.

Orphan felt the breath tear out of him as he ran, following the thin man. They had reached the doors and burst outside into sunlight. "Come on," the man said and, still gripping him, stirred him over the bridge across the Seine, toward the Victoria Hotel.

The black-clothed figures did not come out of the cathedral. For the moment, there was no pursuit. The thin man and Orphan entered through the doors of the Victoria and the thin man led him directly up the stairs, until they were outside Orphan's room.

"Open the door," the thin man said. Orphan obeyed.

"Now shut it behind you and lock it," the thin man said. Orphan could no longer see his gun.

Orphan sat down on the bed. The thin man stood before him, gazing out on the cathedral through the open window.

"So," the thin man said.

"What just happened?" Orphan said, "And who the hell are you?"

"You can call me Mr. Fogg," the thin man said. "And what just happened is that you're an idiot."

Orphan digested this in silence. Fogg, in his garish clothes and without his gun, looked ridiculous. His face, however, with thin lips curled in distaste and small, cold eyes, looked anything but.

"You were set up," Fogg said. "I don't know—yet—by whom. What were you doing in the cathedral?"

"Hoffman approached me," Orphan said. "I thought . . ."

"You thought he was an agent of the Bookman? That tin man? That mechanical shitting duck? Spare me."

"How do I know *you're* the Bookman's agent?" Orphan said with a courage he didn't quite feel.

"You ever want to see your sweetheart Lucy again, you better start knowing," Fogg said carelessly. "Here." And he pulled out a slim volume from his back pocket and handed it to Orphan. It was vellum-bound, with gilt lettering on the front that announced the title in Gothic script. The letters spelled out a single word: *Orphan*.

Orphan opened it. The book was empty.

"Touch your thumb to the center of the page," Fogg said. Orphan did, and a moment later the paper changed and seemed to shift, and faint letters began to appear on the page.

It was, Orphan thought, a cruel joke: for what appeared on the opposite page was a line-drawing, and it was of Lucy, smiling, waving at him from inside the book, where she was held prisoner. And then the text, that said only, "Do as Mr. Fogg tells you. Remember our bargain. The Bookman."

"Now close it," Fogg said. He took the book back from Orphan and put it into the metal bucket underneath the sink. There was a small, almost-silent explosion, and sparse, pale smoke rose from the bucket.

"Satisfied?"

No, Orphan thought, but outwardly he merely nodded his head.

"So," Fogg said again. "It looks like the Turk's people were trying to subvert you, and someone else—I'd suspect *Les Lézards'* agents here on the continent—both got rid of that nuisance automaton and managed to frame you for its murder. You do know the French consider it murder? Barbarous, but there you go."

Orphan digested this new information. "So I'm wanted for murder?" he said, a hint of disbelief entering his voice. How did I get myself into this? he thought. A couple of hours ago I was meeting famous writers and eating lunch, and now—this?

"It looks like it," the thin man said. "You're going to have to leave Paris tonight."

He began to pace around the room, like a man used to the exact confines of a cell. Three steps up, three steps down. Never varying. His hands were clasped behind his back. The smoke from the bucket had stopped. Orphan looked inside and saw only a fine black powder.

"Leave that alone," Fogg said irritably. "I need to think." Orphan settled on the bed and glared at the wall. I didn't ask for any of this, he thought.

Finally, Fogg stopped moving. "Stay here," he said, "keep the door locked. I will come back for you. Don't let anyone else in."

Before Orphan could say anything he was gone, and the door closed behind him with a bang. Orphan was left alone in the room, wishing he was somewhere, anywhere, else.

Five: A Duo of Detectives

A loud knock on the door woke him. He felt groggy and bad-tempered; for a moment he could not recall where he was.

"Open up, and quickly!" said a voice behind the door. It was Fogg's.

Orphan stood up. Outside the sun was setting over the cathedral. The building glowed in its greenish light, like a sore in the wounded land of the island it rested on. He opened the door.

"Come with me!" Fogg said. He was now dressed in a somber suit and, bizarrely, wore a convention name-tag that announced him as *M. Lecoq*.

"Hurry up!" Fogg said. Orphan took his small traveling bag and followed Fogg through the corridor and down the stairs: but instead of leaving the hotel as he felt sure they would, Fogg led him to that same hall in which the convention's opening ceremony had earlier taken place.

The room was already in darkness, but for a few scattered lamps casting a dim light from the walls. The room was also, Orphan saw with surprise, full, and he and Fogg took seats at the last row at the back. "Now keep quiet," Fogg said, "and wait."

Suddenly, bright light illuminated the empty stage, and Jules Verne strode onto the platform, smiling like a conjurer.

"*Mesdames et messieurs!*" he said, spreading his arms wide, "Ladies and gentlemen! *Bienvenue* and welcome back!"

Orphan half-heartedly joined the clapping.

"We are gathered here for perhaps the most important part of today's festivities," Verne said, and his eyes twinkled. "At least, I am sure it seems that way to the authors in question."

There was general laughter. Orphan saw Herb sitting in the front row, looking tense.

"I refer, of course," Verne said, "to the award ceremony. The annual presentation of *Le Prix Hugo!*"

His voice was drowned in clapping. Verne beamed and spread his hands wide. Orphan sat tense in his chair, not understanding why they were there instead of getting out of Paris. Beside him Fogg sat serenely in his seat, his eyes closed, his breathing deep and even.

I can't believe he's *sleeping*, Orphan thought, aghast. I need to get out of here.

"Stay where you are," Fogg said, and one eye opened and looked at Orphan. "And keep quiet." And he closed his eye and looked as asleep as if he had never even spoken.

Orphan subsided with a grimace.

"The *Prix Hugo*," Jules Verne said, "or the Hugo Award, for our Anglophone

friends, is named after that great writer of the imaginary and the marvelous, of the unknown and the unexplained, the one and only Victor Hugo." He took a deep breath. "Hugo, one of the founding fathers of our genre, was the first president of the *Société du Roman Scientifique et de la Fiction Étrange*, which was founded in the wake of the Quiet Revolution. It is in honor of Victor Hugo—who passed away only three years ago—that we give this award, for the best works in the field of scientific romance and weird fiction." He stopped and gazed over the audience, and it seemed to Orphan, if only momentarily, that Verne was looking directly at *him*, and that, before he turned away, had nodded to him.

"E.T.A Hoffman was meant to present the awards," Verne said, his voice booming over the enraptured audience, "but, alas, he has gone missing."

There was a small burst of laughter from the crowd. Orphan felt sick.

"Instead," Verne called, "we have the rare honor, the great privilege, of presenting none other than—"

He never finished the introduction and, subsequently, Orphan never did learn who was to present the awards; nor did he ever find out who won the *Prix Hugo* that year.

The doors of the hall opened, and two men entered. On the podium Jules Verne fell quiet. The crowd, with a confused murmur, turned to the doors.

He knew one of the men, Orphan realized. It was Fix, the detective from the train. The man beside him had dark, curly hair, with a fastidious moustache and a high forehead that seemed to gleam in the light of the room.

"Auguste Dupin," the man announced into the expectant air of the room, "of the *Sûreté*." He motioned to his companion. "Detective Fix, Scotland Yard. Please, do not attempt to leave the room. I have stationed officers outside."

Verne had left the podium and sat in the first row, looking bemused. The same short, balding man who earlier concluded Verne's opening speech, and was patently one of the organizers, rose and began speaking in rapid French.

"Please," Dupin said, raising a hand to silence him. "Detective Fix?"

Fix coughed pointedly. "Inspector Dupin has asked me to come along on this investigation. Due to the nature of things"—he didn't quite elaborate what that was—"we shall use, *aha*, the Queen's tongue for the moment."

There was an angry murmur from the crowd, but Dupin smiled. He had the smile of a charming snake, one used to capturing its prey. Beside Orphan, the apparently sleeping Mr. Fogg sank deeper into his chair.

Dupin barked an order, and a man came shuffling in through the door. He was a punk, Orphan saw. His head was shaven and painted in stripes of yellow on green, and he hissed into the air, a forked tongue darting out in a grotesque imitation of a lizard. His clothes were black leather, torn in places to reveal a skin that was striped like his head.

"Can you point him out?"

The punk unhurriedly scanned the room of faces, beginning near the podium and working his way to the back. Orphan shrank back in his seat, feeling helpless and afraid. His palms sweated, and his heart beat faster with the approach of that unrelenting gaze.

"Him," the punk said laconically. His long finger ended in a sharp-looking talon.

He was pointing directly at Orphan.

Two uniformed officers appeared through the door and moved toward Orphan. Beside him, Fogg did not stir. Orphan wanted to shout at him, to rouse him from inactivity, to make him do something.

But there is nothing either of us can do, he thought, and he rose slowly, feeling helpless, at the approach of the officers.

The officers, flanking him on either row of chairs, led him to the doors, and left

him before Dupin and Fix.

"You!" Fix said. He smiled suddenly, a cold, victorious smile. "From the moment I saw you I knew you were up to no good," he said, looking satisfied. Then the smile left him and he said, "If only I had been more diligent, perhaps monsieur Hoffman would still be alive."

"What?"—"Who?"—"What are you saying?"—"The Hoff?"—"Impossible!" were the exclamations from the audience. Orphan suddenly felt as if he were playing a part in a bad French farce.

"You know him?" Dupin said, and then, "Of course. He must have come over at the same time you did."

"Precisely," Fix said.

Dupin gave Orphan a long, calculating look. Then he smiled, and the smile transformed his face and made him appear both young and warm. "Your papers, please, monsieur," he said, reaching out his hand. Orphan, who had not said a word so far, reached into his pocket and brought out the passport.

"Homer Chapman," Dupin said. Then, "Interesting."

He clicked his fingers. The young punk was taken out, still hissing, and the two uniformed policemen then shut the doors of the hall and stood with their backs to them, guarding the exit. Fix looked surprised.

"Are you not going to arrest him for the murder?" he said.

"Not so soon," Dupin said, and his smile curved around itself. He began pacing up and down the room, to the podium and back. The heads of the audience followed his movement, a sea of eyes fastened on the detective. Not Herb, though. He was looking at Orphan, and his eyes betrayed confusion, but also an obvious sympathy for Orphan, as if he were asking his friend to keep up his spirits, that this was obviously just a ghastly mistake.

Dupin spread his hands wide; a theatrical gesture, Orphan thought irritably. Since coming to France he had been locked into some grotesque production, cast in the main role by unknown architects. Charge me or let me go, he thought. Fogg was still seemingly asleep in the shadows.

"*Mesdames et messieurs*," Dupin said, opening his hands wide as if to embrace the whole room. He reminded Orphan, and no doubt some of the assembled cast, of Verne's own antics. What was it about the French, Orphan wondered—they do so like their public performances.

"A heinous crime has taken place in our beautiful city. It is to my great regret that you, our honored guests, must be faced with such evil—" he brought his hands together in a clap, and several people in the audience jumped at the sound—"but there it is. Evil has struck, here, in your very midst."

"What is the meaning of this?" said the short balding man. "I do not know who this young man, this *Homer Chapman*, is. He is not one of us. If he is guilty, please take him away. What has it to do with us?"

Fix, too, looked as if he wanted to ask that question, and he scowled at Orphan with a hostile look, his nostrils flaring.

"Ah," Dupin said, still smiling, "but you see, it has a lot to do with you and your gathering, monsieur."

He turned to Orphan. "Please, describe your version of events, monsieur."

Orphan felt all eyes come to rest on him. He shuffled his feet, coughed, and felt heat rise to his face.

"Please," Dupin said again.

"I met Hoffman for the first time this morning," Orphan said, "in the company of Herb Wells and several other writers in the dining room of the hotel."

"Algernon Blackwood, M.R. James, and Arthur Machen," Dupin murmured. "Yes.

Do continue."

"Hoffman engaged me in conversation about chess. I did not know what he meant. He suggested that I should visit the cathedral. It seemed he wished to show it to me. I do not know why. I agreed to meet him there."

"Why?"

"I was intrigued," Orphan said. Dupin nodded.

"I came with Herb to the opening ceremony. Then I walked around and bought lunch. Then I went to the cathedral. I entered it and saw Hoffman already seated by the altar at the center. I came and sat beside him. He didn't talk. When I turned to him he fell over, and I saw that he was shot."

A murmur rose over the assembled guests.

"Then what happened?" Dupin asked softly. Orphan glanced at Fogg, who was almost invisible on the seat. What could he do?

"I was attacked by several men in black clothing," he said at last.

"Who were these men?"

"I don't know."

"What happened then?"

Orphan hesitated. Then he said, "A man came to my rescue. I did not know who he was. He dragged me away from there while we were pursued by the men. There were shots. He got me out. I went back to the hotel and went straight to my room."

"Why did you not contact the police?"

"I was afraid."

"Who was this man you said came to your rescue so conveniently?"

"I . . ." he hesitated.

"It was I," said a voice, and Fogg rose from his chair.

There was something different about him. His bearing, or the way his eyes seemed to glint now with cold amusement. The set of his shoulders, his poise—almost military, and used to command.

"You!" Fix said. His face had turned white.

"You?" Auguste Dupin said. He looked at Fogg's name tag and smiled. "I do not think your name is Lecoq," he said.

"No," Fogg agreed, and he took off the badge and threw it on the floor.

"Then who, pray tell, are you, monsieur?"

"My name," Fogg said, "is Fix. Detective Inspector Fix, of Scotland Yard. And this man is an impostor."

"Outrageous!" Fix said, and on his face the red chased away the white. "How—how dare you!" He turned to the two uniforms by the door and, pointing a shaking finger at Fogg, said, "Arrest this man!"

The two uniforms didn't stir. Dupin, with a delighted smile on his face, made a calming gesture with his hands. "Now this *is* interesting," he said. "Can you prove who you say you are?"

"My papers," Fogg said, "and a sealed letter from my supervisor, Inspector Adler."

Dupin took the papers from him. He opened the letter, breaking its seal, and scanned it. "The famous Inspector Adler," he said. "I have wanted to meet her for a long time now."

"She has spoken well of you, too, sir," Fogg said.

"Preposterous!" Fix said. "Dupin, I demand you arrest this man at once! He is a con-man and a knave, a rogue operator working usually under the alias of a Mr. Fogg or Mr. Myst, and I have come to Paris on his heels, believing him to have left the Empire to the continent at the behest of his master—the Bookman himself!"

A hush fell over the audience. "*L'homme de livres!*" someone exclaimed, softly. "*Sacrebleu!*"

"Let's hear him out," Dupin said. "I am intrigued."

"Inconceivable!" Fix said, his face a large red splotch, like a soiled cloth of spilled wine.

Fogg addressed the silent room. "My name is Fix," he said. "I ask you to consider the following." He began ticking items on his fingers, talking rapidly.

"One: *Convention du Monde du Roman Scientifique* is announced, drawing in people from all over the world, all of whom come to Paris. Who are they? Are they as they seem? I must tell you, monsieur, that your little gathering has created a lot of interest with us at Scotland Yard—no doubt at the *Sûreté*, too." Dupin nodded, unsmiling. "Who knows what people come here under the pretext of being—what is it you call them—*fans*?"

"We are respectable members of the literary establishment!" the balding man said angrily from the crowd. Dupin, beside Fogg, shrugged. "I do not know about *respectable*," he murmured, then shook his head. "It is no matter."

"Two," Fogg said, "the automaton known as E.T.A. Hoffman, AKA E.T., AKA The Hoff, attends the convention as an honored guest. Originally constructed by the Leibniz Korp. of Germany, it later took political asylum in the Republic, where it became a free citizen. That same automaton, I may add, of which we had a reasonable reason to suspect of being involved with a radical underground movement, Blake's Revolutionary Army, whose purpose is to overthrow the rule of *Les Lézards*."

"Impossible!" the balding man said. Fogg fixed him with a cool stare that made the little man visibly wilt.

"Three—a question: Who would want Hoffman dead?"

"Indeed," Dupin said. Orphan, left unnoticed by their side, had the strange feeling that the two were almost identical: like two brothers separated at birth who still maintain a parallel personality throughout their life. "Allow me. Killing Hoffman in the cathedral, a symbol of *Les Lézards* at the very heart of the Republic, would be a message impossible to ignore. But a message to whom? To *Les Lézards*—or to those who try to fight against them?"

"It depends," Fogg said, "on who those men were who attacked us so suddenly upon discovering the body." He looked over the audience and smiled. It was not a nice smile. "I believe they were, like Hoffman, members of this convention."

"Impossible!"—"Ludicrous!"—"How dare you, sir, how *dare* you?"—and from Fix, a look full of hatred aimed at Fogg.

"Look here," he said, "surely the account of this Mr. *Chapman*—if that is even his real name—suggests that it was *this* man, this impostor who dares to claim to be *me*, who was responsible for the murder? Can't you see that this, this *pretender*, this *fraud*, is the real murderer? *He* killed Hoffman. Not some imagined men in black. *He* killed Hoffman, and now when things are desperate and he has been found out, unable to flee, he is making one last, desperate stand!"

"A valid point of view," Dupin murmured.

"Nonsense," Fogg said. "Chapman is an innocent victim of circumstances. The question we must ask ourselves is this—who were the men who skulked in the cathedral and attacked us both? *That*, I suggest, will help us most on our quest for truth."

"I may be able to help here," Dupin said. "Since Scotland Yard is not the only police force to have intelligence at their disposal." He paused and looked at the audience with glittering eyes.

"Do go on," Fogg said.

"Monsieur Hoffman was German, as you pointed out. A product of German ingenuity, and of the Liebniz Korp. engineers. For a long time we at the *Sûreté* suspected Hoffman of—how shall I put it?—not entirely giving up his loyalties to the fatherland. That he was, in other words, something of a spy."

"And you did nothing?" Fix said.

"Why catch a fly if the spider goes free?" Dupin said. "We kept our eyes on him. This convention did concern us. So many people from so many different places, all gathered together in Paris—who knows what foreign agents would attempt to use such an opportunity?"

"The men in the cathedral?" Fogg said, looking annoyed. Orphan almost smiled: the detectives were competing with each other in one-upmanship. Perhaps, he thought, both already know the conclusion they were each leading toward.

"Patience," Dupin said. He raised one hand theatrically. "As I said, we suspected Hoffman. And, when this convention came to our attention, we naturally paid particular attention to any German delegates who might be attending."

In the audience Orphan saw the young man he had spotted earlier while having his lunch. He was looking directly at Dupin, with a small smile playing on his face. "What was his name?"

"Hanns Heinz Ewers," Dupin said, and the young man rose from his seat and made a sardonic bow.

More murmurs from the audience.

"An audacious adventurer," Dupin said. "How old are you? Seventeen?"

"Eighteen," Ewers said.

"You're under arrest."

The young man continued to smile. "I think you'll find I have diplomatic immunity," he said calmly. "You can look it up with my embassy. Besides, I didn't kill Hoffman."

"But you *were* at the cathedral," Dupin said. "You were leading the group that attacked Mr. Chapman here."

"What did you expect?" Ewers said. "As far as I knew, he killed E.T."

He turned to Orphan and touched his fingers to his forehead in a salute. "My apologies, by the way."

"I saw you," Orphan said. "Were you watching me? You knew I was meant to meet him. It was you and that French man. Leroux."

"I had nothing to do with it!" said an angry voice. Gaston Leroux, looking pale and very young, rose and glared at them.

"No doubt monsieur *le fantôme* arranged for that group of thugs to be put at your disposal?" Dupin said with a smirk. "Oh, we know all about you, Leroux. You let your imagination and your life become hopelessly entangled."

"I am an artist, not a murderer," Leroux said.

"An artist, sure. And a masked vigilante at night, *non?*"

"Enough!" Fix said. "I demand you stop this charade, Dupin. It is clear it is this Fogg who killed your man. Arrest him and be done with it."

"Silence!" Dupin said. Fogg smiled thinly.

"I don't understand," Orphan said. His palms were wet. He was growing angry. This really *was* a charade, he thought. Dupin, playing up to the audience. The man was a fool. "Who killed Hoffman?"

Dupin nodded. He was not smiling. He looked, now, as if the play was finally over. He turned and addressed the room. His voice boomed over the assembled heads the way Verne's had done. They were in the palm of his hands. A captive audience.

"Hoffman arranged to meet Chapman in the cathedral. I suspect Chapman is here on his own undeclared mission. I suspect, too, though I cannot prove it, that he is an agent of the automaton they call The Turk. But we, the French, have no fight with the Turk. That is for the lizards to deal with."

He began ticking items off on his hands in unconscious imitation of Fogg.

"One: Hoffman arranged to meet Chapman in the cathedral.

"Two: Hoffman notifies Ewers, who, together with Leroux and his gang of local misfits, hide in the cathedral as backup. My theory is that Hoffman was already sit-

ting there when you arrived, is that not so, monsieur?"

"That's correct," Ewers said. "We stayed well away. I did not know. . . ."

"Quite," Dupin said. "Three: Chapman arrives, discovers Hoffman's death. This man—" he pointed at Fogg, "arrives almost immediately. They make a run for it. Ewers and his boys pursue them, thinking *them* to be the killers."

"Correct," Ewers said. Dupin raised a hand to silence him. "I am speaking."

"My apologies."

"Four: it is a simple assumption to make, the only logical choice, in fact, that Hoffman was killed when he was on his own, before anyone else arrived."

"So who was it?" someone in the audience shouted.

"Why, it is as clear as glass," Dupin said, and he clicked his fingers. The two uniforms by the door stirred.

"It was Detective Fix."

"What? How dare—" The uniforms grabbed him.

"*You*, monsieur, are the real culprit," Dupin said. "*You* are the true agent of that enemy of all thinking men, of *L'homme de livre*! You were seen, monsieur, observing the hotel, pretending to be Detective Fix of Scotland Yard, and then you followed Hoffman and, when he was alone, you killed him!"

His voice thundered, his hands moved majestically as if conducting an orchestra. "*You* are the murderer, and a most fiendish one! How clever of you to come to me, to pretend to work with me in solving this crime, to construct this Mr. Fogg of yours as the criminal while you, yourself, are the real Fogg! And you—" and here his voice grew even louder and more thunderous—"You are under arrest!"

The audience rose to their feet as one and gave a standing ovation. Their clapping was loud enough to bring down the roof. Dupin smiled, bowed, and led the way out of the room, the two uniformed men and their prisoner in tow.

Orphan remained standing, baffled—and quite badly needing a pee.

Six: The End of the Affair

Events took a speedy turn. Orphan barely had time to relieve himself before Fogg whisked him out of the building and into a waiting barouche-landau with darkened windows. Orphan climbed in after Fogg and sat down, feeling light-headed. The barouche-landau pulled away and into the traffic.

"At last!" a booming voice said, and only then did Orphan register the man sitting opposite them.

It was Jules Verne.

"How tedious that man Dupin is!" He smiled, exposing teeth like jagged breakers on a stormy shore. "I must confess you had me worried there for a moment, Fogg. Or shall I say Fix?"

Fogg laughed. "Poor Fix," he said, "I'd love to see his face when they lock him up behind bars!"

"Forget Fix, it's Dupin's face I'd like to see when he realizes he got the wrong man!" Verne said.

Orphan stared at Verne. He had changed his clothes, and now wore a dark, velvet-lined cape and held a traveling-stick in his hand, a dark ebony cane capped with a silver skull.

"So who killed Hoffman?" Orphan said at last.

Verne chuckled. Fogg wore a thin smile like a cut from a blade.

"I did," he said. "Of course."

Orphan felt his hands tighten. "You bastard."

"Shut up, boy," Fogg said, the smile disappearing like a fencing blade unbending. "You work for the Bookman now. And what the Bookman does, and how he uses his pieces on the board, is up to only one man."

"The Bookman," Orphan said, and thought, he is no man.

"Correct," Fogg said.

Le maire de Paris assassiné!

Paris—In the early hours of the evening the mayor, the esteemed Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, was assassinated by person or persons unknown. The one-time magician and maker of automata (whose phenomenal success earned him the sobriquet *The Heir of Vaucanson*) was found in a locked room inside the Hôtel de Ville. The room was secured from the inside, and there was no sign of tampering with the lock. The mayor's body was obliterated by a small explosive device. The mayor's personal secretary has confirmed to this newspaper that shortly before the event she delivered to the mayor a parcel that had just arrived in the last post. She said, "It felt like a heavy book." No one at the *Sûreté* was available for comment, and the whereabouts at that time of Inspector Dupin, who was in charge of the mayor's security, remain unknown.

Orphan stared at the newspaper. They had just pulled into Nantes station.

It all made sense now, he thought. The killing of Hoffman in the cathedral. Fogg framing him for the act. All to withdraw attention from the Bookman's real plans, all to lure Dupin to the wrong place at the wrong time, so that an innocent-looking book could be delivered to the mayor. And yet—it was, he had to admit, brilliantly done. At one stroke the Bookman's faction had disposed of the mayor, of the Hoffman automaton, and put away the real detective, that poor man Fix, behind bars.

"Oh, cheer up, Orphan," Verne said. He beamed at him. "The story's been a tragic one, with death and ugly murder . . . and your own story, not told here, full of love and loss and a quest for redemption. . . . I hope I could write it one day."

"It isn't over yet," Fogg said. "So save your energies until Orphan reaches the end. If he does."

"Ah, The End!" Verne said, and he sighed a little, as if overcome by emotion. "These are always my favorite words in a book."

"To write or to read?" Orphan said, unable to restrain himself.

"Why, both," Verne said, smiled, and twirled his cane.

THE END. ○

The Fate of Worlds

**A bat's swoop
blinks out some stars
ever so briefly
like an oracle revealing
where black holes will be.**

— William Cullen Jr.

NEXT ISSUE

JULY ISSUE

The July 2014 issue brings the multiple Hugo-Award-winning **Allen M. Steele** back to our pages with a mysterious novella concerning the enigmatic “Legion of Tomorrow.” Although at first glance this puzzling organization seems to simply represent science fiction’s rich past, it soon becomes clear that their plans for the future may offer humanity’s best shot at an adventuresome new day.

ALSO IN JULY

While Allen’s story starts us on our journey toward tomorrow, **Alexander Jablovok** gets us all the way there with an anecdote about an academic working long after our own time who learns more about himself than the past in “The Instructive Tale of the Archeologist and His Wife”; “The Woman from the Ocean” is a distant traveler who returns from a generations-spanning space voyage to find a much altered humanity in **Karl Bunker’s** new story; new author **Evan Fuller** brings us back to the near future for a look at corporate politics in “Five Six Seven”; **Sandra McDonald** returns to our own time for a heartbreaking tale about a young woman with an unusual talent and those around her who become a part of the “Story of Our Lives”; **M. Bennardo** muses on “How Do I Get to Last Summer From Here?”; and then we’ll hop back to a future where the players may remind us of today—but life as we know it is almost unrecognizable—and accept our invitation to **Robert Reed’s** terrifying “Blood Wedding.”

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg’s Reflections asks the stunning question—“Was Jules Verne a Science Fiction Writer?”; **Norman Spinrad’s** On Books analyzes “Retro Versus Visionary”; plus we’ll have an array of poetry and other features you’re sure to enjoy. Look for our July issue on sale at newsstands on May 6, 2014. Or subscribe to *Asimov’s*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We’re also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com’s* Kindle and Kindle Fire, and *BarnesandNoble.com’s* Nook, as well as from *magzter.com/magazines*, Google Play, and Kobo’s digital newsstand!

COMING SOON

new stories by **James Gunn, Nancy Kress, Tochi Onyebuchi, Jeremiah Tolbert, Jay O’Connell, James Patrick Kelly, Doug C. Souza, Tom Purdom, Tim McDaniel, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Jason Sanford, Susan Palwick, Nick Wolven**, and many others!

NEPTUNE'S BROOD

By Charles Stross

Ace, \$25.95 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-425-25677-0

Stross's latest is a space opera, set in the same universe as *Saturn's Children*, but many years after that novel. The human race is essentially extinct, though a few specimens survive—the results of a program to revive the species. The majority of the inhabitants of the universe are essentially “metahuman” robots, with numerous enhancements from the human model that many of them are designed to resemble.

The narrator, Krina Alizond 114, is a metahuman banker—or rather, as we learn, a banking historian who specializes in the study of scams. That's familiar ground for Stross, in whose work economics often appears as the main “scientific” element. Here, the major theme is how an interstellar colonization effort is financed, and what happens to money when it needs to be transferred between trading partners who may be hundreds of years apart, and whose projects may take a thousand years to turn a profit. That's a key issue, because Stross assumes a universe in which FTL travel remains a pipe dream; the only way to reach distant stars is via slow ships with crews whose life expectancy is measured in centuries.

Krina is on a mission, the full nature of which we learn only gradually. At the beginning, she is on a frontier planet looking for a way to get to another planet to see one of her sisters, with whom she is planning to work on a project somehow related to her studies. She encounters various kinds of red tape, resulting in her missing the launch window. She ends up having to sign on as a crew member in order to reach her destination planet. The only berth available is on an even slower than usual ship run by an oddball religious order that wants

to bring the original human race back, in the flesh. Meanwhile, just as she is about to leave, we learn that someone is following her—and that they are willing to kill anyone who gets in their way.

More complications ensue; the religious ship Krina has taken passage on has lost much of its crew in an accident, and she ends up doing most of the menial work aboard ship. But before they've gotten very far, they encounter pirates—pirates of a sort that makes sense in the economic climate of interstellar travel as envisioned by Stross: insurance investigators, sniffing out fraud. Meanwhile, Krina's stalker has gotten aboard the ship. But the resolution of that subplot is postponed as the pirates take Krina aboard their ship, coincidentally headed for her destination—or so it seems.

The plot complications keep mounting, with Stross's theme of future economics always near the center of the machinations. There's a fair amount of comedy along the way, notably lampoons of religion, hereditary aristocracies, military space opera, and various Internet scams. There's enough action to keep you turning pages, and enough intellectual nourishment to make you stop and absorb what's really going on every so often.

Every time you think Stross has found his true mode of writing, he comes up with something to make you reconsider. This may bother editors who want a predictable product every time out of the gate, but for this reader, at least, it's the best possible reason to pick up a new title just because the name on the cover is Charles Stross.

IN THE COMPANY OF THIEVES

By Kage Baker

Tachyon, \$15.95 (tp)

ISBN: 978-1-61696-129-9

This posthumous short story collection is a reminder what a fine writer Baker

was, and how much the field lost with her death.

The stories are related to Baker's "Company" series, a time-travel scenario in which the agents of rich collectors from the future come back in time to obtain valuable items, whether works of art, original manuscripts, or pop culture ephemera. Time travel is one-way only, so the agents are given immortality and an array of what amount to super-powers to allow them to obtain and protect the items they collect. They are also, as the book's title suggests, quite willing to work on the shady side of the law.

Given the time travel theme at the core of the series, it's more or less natural that the stories are set in several different places and historic eras. Baker was especially fond of steampunkish Victoriana, and one of the best pieces here, "The Women of Nell Gwynn's," is a fine example of that mode. Nell Gwynn's is a brothel in Victorian London, catering to the most respectable segment of society. The story begins as the tale of Lady Beatrice, the daughter of an Indian officer who is captured by Afghan tribesmen in the disastrous British retreat from Kabul in 1842. Escaping, she returns to England, only to find herself an outcast due to her "unchaperoned" captivity.

With no other options, she turns to prostitution—and is discovered by the proprietor of Nell Gwynn's, Mrs. Corvey, who convinces her to join the brothel. As she soon discovers, her new employer is actually a front operation for the Company, using access to the highest levels of government to obtain secrets—and favors. The entire setup is thoroughly delicious, and Baker makes the most of its humorous potential.

Two stories are set in 1940's Hollywood, featuring the odd couple of Lewis and Joseph. The one works as a private investigator for the studios, keeping the stars out of trouble; the other specializes in obtaining rare manuscripts, copying them so no one will know they're missing. Both are immortal cyborgs, working for the company. Baker drops in loads of Hol-

lywood in-jokes, and in "The Rude Mechanicals," shows us a wonderful production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" by a megalomaniac German director. The byplay between the rough-and-tumble Joseph and the fastidious Lewis is the stuff of great sitcoms.

Other stories are a good bit darker in mood and tone. "Mother Aegypt" is set in a medieval central Europe, with a maladroït con man named Golesco as protagonist. Fleeing outraged victims, he hooks up by chance with the title figure, Madam Amaunet, a thin black woman who tells fortunes and claims to be from Egypt. Thinking to advance his own fortunes, he tags along with her and her servant, a tiny man named Emil. The story plays out as a kind of twisted comedy, with a wrenching revelation at the end.

The first story in the volume may actually be the most poignant. One of the immortals is set to record in his memory the landscapes of San Francisco, starting in the late nineteenth century. He becomes attached to a rich man's private park, as does a mortal woman he first meets as a young girl. As time goes on, they are the only two who remember it—but while he is immortal, with a perfect memory, her mind begins to fade, along with her physical health. The conclusion, touching and tragic at once, shows Baker's emotional range.

Prefaces by Baker's sister, Kathleen Bartholomew, give insight into the stories. Bartholomew completed the final story from Baker's notes, and it is successful enough that one can hope there will be more to come.

THE VILLAGE SANG TO THE SEA: A Memoir of Magic
By Bruce McAllister
Aeon, \$14.95 (tp)
ISBN: 978-0-9534784-9-1

This charming book links several short stories set in the same small Italian town in the 1950s.

The protagonist is a young American boy, Brad Lattimer, whose father is a naval officer stationed in Italy during the

Cold War. Rather than send their son to the American school on the naval base, his parents decide to give him a more authentic experience of the country by living in a village and sending him to school with Italian boys. The experience is, in many ways, more "authentic" than they bargained for.

While there is an autobiographical element to the stories—McAllister did spend his early teen years in Italy, and there are some other parallels between his own life and the narrator's—the fantastic element clearly sets these apart from the strictly realistic. That becomes evident in the very first story, in which the broad shape of Brad's life in the small village is set out. The village has a kind of magic about it, and Brad seems destined to chronicle it.

In the second story, "Poison," that promise begins to play out. Brad's pet cat dies—poisoned, the other boys tell him, by one of the witches who live on the outskirts of town. Enraged, he goes to confront the witch—and comes back with an unexpected lesson in life, plus an unexpected replacement for the lost pet. In the next story, "The Bleeding Child," he travels to a shunned village a short distance away and finds a monstrous hidden society maintained by a kind of ritual magic. He ultimately leaves without comprehending what he has seen, though it resonates deeply. Still another mystery is at the heart of "Mary," in which Brad and a group of other Navy brats visit a supposedly abandoned hospital and discover the hidden lives of its inhabitants.

Further stories and short vignettes in the interstices between them fill in the picture of life in a small Italian town half a century ago; the reader gets a crash course in the culture shock of a transplanted American trying to understand not only a foreign country but the mysteries of the adult world and of a society ravaged by World War II only a few years before. Add to that a strong element of magic and the combination is compelling.

McAllister mixes in the stories of the Shelleys and Lord Byron—the two poets and the woman who wrote *Frankenstein*—who lived in the town more than a century before the events of his book, and whose spirits continually call out to young Brad. Their stories, with certain other elements of the setting, repeat like leitmotifs in each of the tales, giving them a sort of poetic unity over and above their shared setting.

These stories, poised at the intersection of the poetic, the weird, and the nostalgic, probably aren't to everyone's taste. But if you're in the mood for something outside the usual modes of fantasy—something Gene Wolfe might have written if he'd spent his teen years in Italy—I highly recommend them.

CHILDREN OF FIRE

By Drew Karpysyn

Del Rey, \$26.00 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-345-45223-6

Karpysyn, who has written a string of media and gaming tie-ins, turns his hand to epic fantasy in this sweeping tale. While the prose style will not make anyone forget Tolkein or Wolfe, the author has obviously learned the fine points of story-telling.

The story begins with Daemron, an immortal being who has been exiled from the mortal world. Presented with an opportunity to return, he attempts to send his soul back. But the spell he is using only partially works, breaking his soul into four components, each of which ends up in a child born into the mortal world, and each at the cost of a parent's life. The four grow up to become the protagonists of the story, each a separate aspect of the immortal's character: wizard, warrior, prophet, king.

Karpysyn then turns to the early lives of the four children: Keegan, son of a farmer; Cassandra, the daughter of a noble lord's steward; Vaaler, crown prince of the Danaan, an elf-like people; and Scythe, a doctor's daughter raised aboard a ship. Each shows, at an early age, evidence of Daemron's influence—and be-

cause of it, none can quite take the role they normally would have. Part of that is because of the Order of the Crown, a church-like organization of blind prophets who are dedicated to preventing the return of the Old Gods and the chaotic magic they wield. The Order hunts down all children who show signs of magical ability, destroying them or forcing them into its ranks.

But an independent mage, Rexol, wants an apprentice, and he intervenes in the lives of three of them, in defiance of the Order. He protects and trains Cassandra for a while, before he is forced to surrender her. He then takes on Prince Vaaler, at the request of his mother the queen, who hopes the mage can cure her son's apparent lack of the magical ability he should have inherited. Finally Keegan comes to him, and he proves to be the most powerful of all—perhaps even more than his master. Meanwhile, Scythe is living a less protected life after the death of her father, eventually forming an alliance with a giant barbarian from the east country.

There are enough surprises to keep the reader from taking anything for granted, including the deaths of several characters who at first appeared to have important roles to play. By the end of this volume, three of the four have joined forces, not necessarily completely willingly, and the extent of their powers is becoming evident. Daemron has also succeeded in sending his agents to infiltrate the mortal world, and one of their first goals is to obtain the three talismans.

This opening volume of a new fantasy series should appeal to fans of epic fantasy; I will certainly be interested to see where Karpysyn goes with it.

WORLDS OF EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

**Edited by Mike Resnick and
Robert T. Garcia**

Baen, \$15.00 (tp)

ISBN: 978-1-4516-3935-3

Here's a collection of stories by diverse hands, mining the various imaginative

scenarios created by Burroughs.

The book is a reminder just how many fictional worlds Burroughs invented. The jungle worlds of the Tarzan books are probably the most familiar, followed closely by Barsoom, his version of Mars, and Pellucidar, the primitive world hidden inside the hollow Earth, in which the dinosaurs still roam—and rule. But several of the authors here take on less familiar locales—Venus, the Moon, the fictional planet Poloda, not to mention a few set in more familiar locales, such as the American West.

And the roster of authors includes a few who may surprise readers: Kristine Kathryn Rusch, who tells a story of Tarzan's role in World War I; Peter David, who brings Burroughs' Moon Maid to New York City; Mercedes Lackey and F. Paul Wilson, each of whom spins a new story of Pellucidar; and Joe R. Lansdale, who doubles the fun by bringing Tarzan to Pellucidar. However, there is only one Barsoom story in the collection, written by Resnick in 1963—also the only reprint here. This was to avoid rights problems related to the recent movie.

All the authors are clearly familiar with the Burroughs canon, and deliver good yarns in the vein of the original. The tributes are generally sincere, and it's obvious most of the authors are having fun with genre stereotypes and clichés at the same time. Probably only Resnick's story, which is admittedly quite different from his mature work, really attempts to mimic Burroughs' style, though the others echo some of the old pulpster's more obvious mannerisms. Most draw the line well short of outright parody, though.

A fun idea, well executed by all involved.

THE APE-MAN'S BROTHER

By Joe R. Lansdale

Subterranean Press, \$20 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-59606-618-2

In this entertaining novella, Lansdale gives us another Burroughs spin-off, poised somewhere between the Tarzan books, the Pellucidar series, and an al-

ternate 1920s America. As with his entry in the Baen anthology, it respects the spirit of the original while injecting the author's own more complex viewpoint.

The narrator is an ape-like hominid of a previously unknown species. He is brought back to the human world by the survivors of an expedition lost in his world somewhere beneath the polar ice-cap. With him comes another survivor—the son of a human couple that came to his world to raise a son genetically engineered for superhuman strength and long life. When the parents died, the son—the Big Guy, as the narrator calls him—was raised by the narrator's people, among whom he became as one of the tribe. The arrival of a second expedition changes things—and ends in the narrator and his human “brother” venturing into the civilized world, in the company of their rescuer, Dr. Rice, who teaches them English and the rudiments of civilized behavior.

Lansdale's comic twist on the Tarzan

myth is that the “ape” takes to human civilization far better than the Big Guy. Possibly more intelligent than *Homo sapiens*—he certainly is, in his own estimation—the narrator adapts well to a sophisticated lifestyle, acquiring a taste for cool jazz, smoking a pipe, and enjoying the various perquisites of civilization. When their movie careers are derailed by the Big Guy's reversion to his jungle-world habits—possibly helped along by the machinations of a member of the Rice expedition whose fiancée fell for him—the narrator settles down to live happily on the residuals of their films. Meanwhile, his human “brother” quickly goes downhill, even losing interest in The Woman, as the narrator always refers to her.

While the story begins in comedy, its conclusion is bittersweet, respecting real-world probabilities without entirely denying the myths it is built on. A fine effort by Lansdale, with stylish illustrations by Ken Laager as an additional attraction. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Here are the three big Easter cons (Norwescon, MiniCon and the UK National Con). Other picks are AggieCon, Ad Astra, RavenCon (where I'll be), ConStellation, EerieCon and MarCon. Next time: Memorial Day. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of our con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Straus

APRIL 2014

- 4-6—AggieCon. For info, write: c/o Cepheid Variable, SOST, TAMU, 125 Koldus, Stop 1236, Slot 780, College Stn. TX 77843. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) <http://aggiecon.tamu.edu/>. (E-mail) info@aggiecon.tamu.edu. Con will be held in: College Station TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton. Guests will include: None announced at press.
- 4-6—Ad Astra. www.ad-astra.org. Holiday Inn & Suites, Markham (Toronto) ON. David Weber, Anne. Groell, Patricia Briggs, S. Erikson.
- 4-6—AmaziCon. www.amazoncon.net. Clarion, Essington (Philadelphia) PA. Pop culture. Horror-film personalities, many movie/TV cars.
- 4-6—A & G Ohio. www.cartooncon.org. Cincinnati OH. Georgia van Cuylenburg, Heather Breckel, Maffew. Anime and gaming ("A & G").
- 4-6—Anime Detour. www.animatedetour.com. Doubletree by Hilton, Bloomington (Minneapolis) MN. Chris Carson, Tony Oliver, Kyle Hebert.
- 4-6—PortmeirCon. www.sixofone.co.uk. Portmeirion UK. Where cult TV show "The Prisoner" filmed. Includes re-enacting famous scenes.
- 4-6—Chevron. www.massiveevents.co.uk. Radisson Edwardian, Heathrow (London) UK. Commercial event for fans of the StarGate shows.
- 11-13—JordanCon. www.jordancon.org. Doubletree, Roswell GA. Patrick Rothfuss, artist Larry Elmore. The works of Robert Jordan.
- 11-13—NE Conf. on Science & Skepticism. www.necss.org. Fashion Institute of Tech., New York NY. Atheism, debunking superstition.
- 11-13—MithraCon. www.mithracon.org. New Haven CT. Academic conference. Worship of Mithras was widespread in the ancient world.
- 12—Otaku Fest. www.otaku-fest.webs.com. Centennial High School, Ellicott City (Baltimore) MD. Anime.
- 17-20—NorwesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 230-7850. www.norwescon.org. Seattle WA. Moorcock, S. McGuire (M. Grant).
- 18-20—MiniCon, c/o Strait, 1228 E. 54th #1E, Chicago IL 60615. www.mnstf.org. Bloomington (Minneapolis) MN. Valente, Wurts, Maitz.
- 18-20—Anime Conji. www.animeconji.org. Sheraton Hotel and Marina, San Diego CA. Vic Mignona. Anime.
- 18-21—UK Nat'l. Con. www.satellite4.org.uk. Crowne Plaza, Glasgow UK. Pratchett (health permitting), J. Meany, J. McKenna, Jim Burns.
- 25-27—RavenCon, Box 36420, Richmond VA 23235. www.ravencon.com. Doubletree (ex-Holiday Inn) Koger Center. Elizabeth Bear.
- 25-27—ConStellation. www.constellationne.net. Lincoln NE. Carrie Vaughn, artist AB Word, TM Daniel C. Nielsen, framer Barrie Bryant.
- 25-27—FILKONTario, 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. www.filkontario.ca. Mississauga (Toronto) ON. SF/fantasy folksinging.
- 25-27—TrekTrax. www.trektrax.org. Marriott NW at Galleria, Atlanta GA. For fans of Star Trek, Star Wars and Battlestar Galactica.
- 25-27—Pulp & Paper Con, c/o Ellis, 13 Spring Lane, Barrington Hills IL 60010. www.windycitypulpandpaper.com. Lombard IL.
- 25-27—ZenkaiKon. www.zenkaicon.com. Lancaster PA. Brina Palencia, Doug Walker, Jonathan Maberry, Lolita Dark, Uncle Yo. Anime.
- 25-28—CostumeCon, Box 15042, 1507 Yonge, Toronto ON M4T 1Z4. www.costumecon32.com. Sheraton Airport. Costumers' big show.

MAY 2014

- 2-4—EerieCon, c/o Box 412, Buffalo NY 14226. www.eeriecon.org. Byblos Resort, Grand Island NY. David B. Coe, Mark Leslie, others.
- 2-4—Corflu. www.corflu.org. Doubletree (formerly Holiday Inn Select) Hotel and Conference Center, Richmond VA. Old-time fanzines.
- 2-4—Gaslight Gathering. www.gaslightgathering.org. Town & Country, San Diego CA. C. Priest, Prof. Elemental, R. Sczerba, D. Benedict.
- 2-4—Malice Domestic, Box 8007, Gaithersburg MD 20898. www.malicedomestic.org. Bethesda MD (near DC). "Traditional mystery" fans.
- 9-11—Spectrum Fantastic Art Live. (913) 538-1142. www.spectrumfantasticartlive.com. Kansas City MO. Camilla d'Errico.
- 9-11—MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. www.marcon.org. Hyatt. Glen Cook, Eric ("1632") Flint, musicians Dale & Deschamps.

JULY 2014

- 17-20—DetCon 1, c/o Box 3199, Ann Arbor MI 48106. www.detcon1.org. Detroit MI. No. American SF Con, with WorldCon abroad. \$65.

AUGUST 2014

- 14-18—LonCon 3, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. www.loncon3.org. Docklands, London UK. The WorldCon. u105/A,C,US\$170.

AUGUST 2015

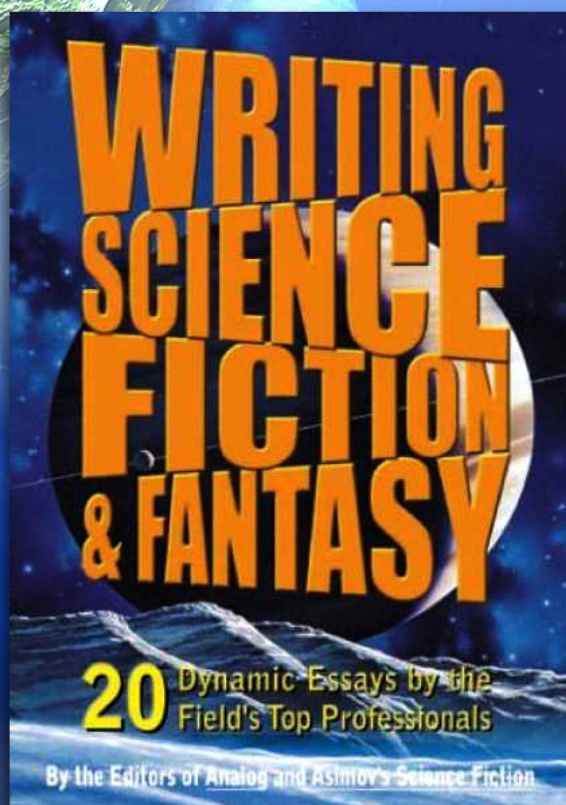
- 19-23—Sasquan, c/o Box 1091, Woodinville WA 98072. www.sasquan.org. Spokane WA. D. Gerrold, V. McIntyre. The WorldCon. \$140.

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